Kiss The Chef

by

Brenda Robertson

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EBIP

HMS Press:

Electronic Books In Print / Books On Disk BOD
ADP & Canadian Poetry Association
London Ontario Chapter

literarynewscpa@yahoo.ca

ISBN 1-895700-44-2

Kiss The Chef

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CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Robertson, Brenda L.
Kiss the chef [computer file]

Text.
ISBN 1-895700-44-2

I. Title.

PR3568.O24793K57 1995 813'.54 C95-900697-4

"Morning." He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Good morning." Good morning? Had she lost her mind? Here she was, lying in bed, she peeked beneath the covers, wearing only a t-shirt which didn't belong to her with the words 'Kiss The Chef' emblazoned across the front. And the man standing beside her bed was half naked. He wore a pair of worn Levis and he was shirtless.

Sydney Elizabeth St. James, you're having a nightmare, she told herself. She looked at the man again. Well, she reconsidered, maybe not a nightmare. But whatever it was, she knew it wasn't real. She closed her eyes tightly and counted to ten slowly. Then she threw in an extra five count for good measure. She opened her eyes and turned her head on the pillow, expecting, knowing that the half naked man would be gone. Surprise. He was still there. He joined her on the bed.

He was beautiful. She knew that beautiful wasn't a word commonly used to describe a male's appearance. But it was the only word that came to mind as she returned his gaze. The only word that came to mind that could possibly describe someone so pleasing to the eye.

"I know this may be a little late in coming," Sydney began hesitantly, "but who the hell are you?" She knew that common sense would dictate that she be concerned or even frightened. After all, it wasn't every day that a woman wakes up to find a strange, half naked man standing beside her bed. But for whatever reason Sydney wasn't frightened. She was dumbfounded, though some would probably say just dumb.

"I'm your fiancé," he answered calmly.

Sydney was wrong. This wasn't a nightmare. This was something straight out of an episode of Candid Camera. Only thing was, she wasn't smiling. Then she thought about her friend Jennifer. This was exactly the sort of thing

Jennifer would have a hand in. Sydney smiled.

"How much? I know my friends put you up to this. How

much did they pay you?"

"Pay me? I don't understand?"

Sydney studied his face. He was being sincere. Now she was becoming concerned.

"Which way to the bathroom?" He got up from the bed.

Sydney's range of view was completely filled with flesh. Male flesh. Hard. Muscular. Bare and tanned. Six feet three inches of it. The flesh glistened. The muscles rippled across the broad chest and flat stomach. And what a chest and stomach they were, decorated by a perfect configu- ration of hair, growing wide across the chest and narrowing to a thin strip that drew the eye downward.

Not trusting her voice, she pointed to the bathroom.

When Sydney heard the shower going, she relaxed. She would think back. She would retrace her every step from the beginning of yesterday until now. Then maybe she would somehow recall how she wound up with a fiancé.

Sydney remembered...

Yesterday began like any other day. She was up at

five, in her office by six. Being president of Lane

Cosmetics, her time was her own. She could come in late, leave early. Go shopping in the middle of the day if it suited her. Which it didn't. She was constantly the first one in and

usually the last one to leave the office.

She had lunch with her friends, Jennifer and Olivia at her favorite restaurant, Justins. They talked about their careers. Jennifer was working on her third novel. And Olivia was excited that she was up for a partnership at her law firm. They talked about men. It was unanimously agreed that all the good men, like Olivia's husband, were taken. They talked about sex. Sydney distinctly remembered that discussion. Probably because she had very little to add to it. Olivia reminded her that now was the time, after she'd made it to the top of the corporate ladder, to take advantage of her success, to have some fun. Jennifer, being Jennifer was a bit more blatant. "Go out and get yourself a young, vacuous hunk and have a wild passionate affair."

After much prodding from her friends she'd reluctantly agreed to go out with them to a Jazz club. Reluctant because the last time she was at a club, men were still using the 'what's your sign' line.

Sydney remembered...

Seeing him the moment she walked into the club. He was attractive. But so were a lot of the other men. They made eye contact. She looked away. She had one maybe two

drinks. He came over to their table. He asked her to

dance. And... and that's where her memory abandoned her.

So, somewhere between dancing and waking up, she had, if she was to believe the man in her shower, gotten engaged. Did she sleep with him last night? Sydney massaged her temples. This was all beginning to read like a plot from a

Danielle Steele novel.

Hoping that Jennifer could shed some light on the situation, she dialed her number. But he walked in. And Sydney put the receiver down.

He wore a towel around his middle. And the mat of

thick curls on his chest were still wet. She hadn't noticed before that his long black hair was pulled back in a pony-tail and that he wore a gold studded earring in his left ear.

"Now that I know that you're my fiancé, I have only one other question to ask. What's your name?" Her tone was sarcastic. But under the circumstances she thought she was entitled.

"Russell Snyder. My friends call me Rusty." He joined her on the bed.

She pulled the covers up around her. "What do your fiancées call you?"

"Never had a fiancée before."

Sydney pushed back the covers and got out of bed. She looked at him. She started to speak but was suddenly struck by how comfortable he appeared. Most men would look silly lying in bed with laced edge pink sheets.

"Speaking of names, aren't you the least bit curious about mine?" Again, she looked for some sign that he was putting her on. But as before, he appeared sincere.

"I already know. You're Sydney Elizabeth St. James. You detest being called Syd. You're thirty-one-years old. You're a big shot at some cosmetic company. Your parents, William and Stephanie, live in North Carolina. Your only sibling, Grant, is a graduate student at The University Of Virginia." He read the expression on her face. "No, I'm not psychic. You told me all of this last night."

"About last night...Some of the details are a little sketchy." Yes, she was lying but he could easily say or make up anything if he realized that her memory of last night was practically

nonexistent.

"A little sketchy?" Rusty questioned. Who was she trying to kid. Last night she was bombed. He was surprised she remembered her own name. "About anything in particular?" She shot him a slicing look. "Oh, you mean that." He smiled. "We didn't."

Sydney sighed, relieved.

"But you wanted to. Actually you were persistent."

"But we didn't? And how persistent?"

"We didn't. And very."

It was an odd thing to take notice of at this particu- lar moment but when he smiled he had a dimple. Just one, almost an inch from the corner of his mouth.

"You seemed to be a reasonable man." She paused, waiting for him to agree with her. He didn't. She con- tinued. "With that in mind, I know you'll understand that the only reason I accepted your marriage proposal was be- cause I had too much to drink."

"You did have too much to drink. I won't argue you that. But it was you not me who did the proposing."

"I proposed?"

Rusty nodded.

"Tell me what happened," Sydney said, her inflection flat.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"You asking me to dance."

He caught her hand, pulling her back on the bed. "We danced. It was slow and long. Then we went back to the table. You introduced me to your friends, Jennifer and Olivia. They left. And we talked. That's when you told me about you and your family."

Last night she had to be more inebriated than she thought. Because she wasn't now nor had she ever been the type of person to open up to others. Aside from her family, jennifer and Olivia were the only ones she discussed personal matters with.

Rusty continued, "After we talked I drove you home."

"Aren't you leaving something out? Like when I proposed to you?"

"All of that came later."

"All of what?"

"Well, when we got here, you sort of changed. You became..."

"I became?" At the moment she was becoming concerned.

"Aggressive."

"Aggressive?"

"Amorous." Amorous was a good choice. It sounded better than aggressive.

"Amorous?" Amorous, aggressive, no difference. She'd thrown herself at this man.

He nodded.

"Tell me."

"Maybe you should remember on your own."

"Tell me." Her voice was taut.

"You said I was attractive."

Was that all? If it was, everything was fine. It was the truth. He was an attractive man.

"And... you mentioned something about my lips."

"I mentioned something about your lips," Sydney repeated.

"You said something about my lips having this need to be kissed look about them."

It's not that bad, Sydney told herself. A little embarrassing maybe but nothing she couldn't live with.

"And-"

"There's more?" she asked incredulously.

"Afraid so. You commented on my butt."

Butt. It all started to come back to her.

Sydney remembered...

Asking him whether his butt was as tight as it looked.

Sydney remembered...

Squeezing it.

Sydney remembered...

Pushing him down on the bed. Lying on top of him. Biting him.

Following the direction of her eyes, his hand went to the hickey on his neck. "You remember."

"If we didn't do anything, what am I doing wearing your t-shirt? And why did you spend the night?"

"You got sick and-"

Sydney broke in, "I got sick?"

"You threw up. And I stayed because I wanted to make sure you were ok."

"Let me see if I understand all of this. I went out with friends. Had too much to drink. Picked up a very attractive stranger-"

"Thank you."

"Brought him home and unsuccessfully tried to seduce him. Then threw up. Is that about right?" This was

ridiculous. Things like this happened to other people.

They didn't happen to her.

"Right before you got sick, you declared your undying love for me. That's when the proposal came along. You mentioned something about going to Nevada."

"I have to go to work."

Sydney stared at herself in the bathroom mirror.

Although she knew she wasn't considered a beautiful woman, she knew she was reasonably attractive. But like most women, sometimes she agonized over her figure. Wishing she had a little more bust or was just a bit more curvaceous.

Sydney half expected Rusty to still be there when she

came out the bathroom. What she hadn't expected was

breakfast."

"I don't eat breakfast."

"Being an intelligent woman I don't have to remind you how important breakfast is." Rusty took her hand, leading her to the kitchen.

It was all a little disconcerting, even ironic. Sydney felt perfectly comfortable in a room of high powered executives. But now, sitting here with Rusty, she felt shy. "This is delicious." She ate the remains of her omelet.

"It's one of my specialties."

"Specialties?"

"I'm a chef."

"What else should I know about my fiancé?" she asked, smiling.

"What else do you want to know?"

Oddly enough, she wanted to know everything about this man. But for now, she'd settle for his age.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty."

Thank God. For a moment she thought he was going to say twenty or some other cradle robbing age. Twenty-nine wasn't bad.

"When will you be thirty?"

"In five years."

Twenty-five. He was six years her junior. After that Sydney listened absently as he told her about himself. He was a chef at Justins. He was born and raised in Black Bottom Louisiana. Had never been out of Louisiana until he came to Lake Gaston three months ago to accept the job at Justins. And he didn't have a serious girlfriend back home or here until now. The 'until now' part she heard clearly.

"I have to go to work. You can show yourself out." What did she suppose to say? See you later, it's been nice?

"I like you Sydney."

Sydney stopped at the door. "What did you say?"

"I like you," he repeated.

"Pardon me?"

"I like you. Is that so surprising?"

"Considering that we've known each other for less than twenty four hours, yes, it's surprising."

CHAPTER TWO

Sydney turned her chair away from her desk to stare out her office window. She needed to have her head examined. She could see herself now, lying on the proverbial couch talking to a therapist. "I've got this problem. Twenty four hours ago I went out with some girlfriends. We had a couple of drinks. The next morning I woke up to find a strange man standing at my bed. He's six years younger than I am. He wears his hair in a ponytail and an earring in his left ear. He's a chef. He was born and raised in Blackwoods, no, Black Bottom Louisiana. And I'd almost forgotten, though you might think it was deliberate, I asked him to marry me. And he accepted." She knew that any competent doctor would have her committed.

Forcing her attention back to the work on her desk, Sydney reached for her attaché case. But it wasn't there. She'd left it at home. The three simple words Russell had spoken, "I like you," incited such panic in her that she practically ran out her apartment. Sydney began to dial her home number but stopped.

Rusty had probably left immediately after she had. And if by chance he hadn't left she didn't want to ask him to bring her her attaché case. By doing so would only serve to bring him further into her life. She didn't want that.

Last night was a big mistake. And she would handle it like she did any other problem she encountered, in a professional manner. The first thing was to identify the problem. Russell Synder. Secondly, find the best and promptest solution. Let Rusty know in no uncertain terms that last night was a freak occurrence and it would never happen again. And finally, persuade him to keep the incident to himself. Even better, forget it ever happened.

Jennifer phoned.

"Tell me everything."

"I asked him to marry me." Sydney took a great deal of pleasure in visualizing Jennifer's open-mouthed expression. "And he accepted."

"If you don't want to tell me what happened, just say so. You don't have to lie about it."

"I'm telling you what happened. We're engaged. And it's all because of you."

"Me?"

"I took your advice. I went out and found myself a young hunk."

"Now you have my full attention."

Sydney relayed the story, the parts she remembered and the parts Russell filled in for her, to Jennifer. She expected her friend to show some sympathy for her situation. Instead she got vintage Jennifer.

"After all of that and you didn't even sleep with him?"

"I was intoxicated. I wouldn't have remembered if we had."

"I remember what Russell looks like. I seriously doubt if you would've forgotten sleeping with him."

They laughed.

Sydney's laughter was cut short when Rusty walked into her office. "I have to go," she said to Jennifer. "I'll call you back."

Rusty took a seat, studying her office. It was impressive. It had a aura of authority about it. But it wasn't masculine.

"Why are you here?" Sydney asked, not wanting to be happy to see him.

"Two reasons. To bring you this." He put her attaché case on her desk. "And to ask you out for lunch."

"Thanks for bringing my case." She put on a pair of round wire-rimmed glasses.

"What about lunch?" If putting on glasses was meant to make her less attractive to him, it failed. Miserably. He found intelligent and successful, women attractive. And Sydney St. James fell into both categories. The fact that she had deep emerald green eyes with thick curly lashes didn't hurt either.

Sydney looked at her calendar. "I have plans for lunch."

"How about dinner?"

"Sorry."

Rusty got up, walked around behind her chair and leaned over her shoulder. "Let me see. You're free on Thursday." He took the pen from her hand and wrote: Dinner at 7/Rusty.

She could feel his breath on her neck. Her body

tensed. Get ahold of yourself, she mentally warned. You're an intelligent woman. Not some teenage girl who gets

tongue-tied because the captain of the football team noticed her.

"How did you get by my secretary?" Debbie had been her secretary for three years. No one or nothing got pass her.

"I might have mentioned something to her about being your fiancé."

"Tell me you didn't?"

He said nothing.

Sydney continued to stare at the door even after he'd left.

"Miss. Warren is on line three."

She'd forgotten about calling Jennifer back.

"What's going on?"

"I had an unexpected visitor. Russell."

"What did he want?"

"He brought me my attaché case. And he asked me out for lunch."

"His place or yours?"

"Neither. I turned him down."

"What? Are you still drunk?"

"I have plans. But we're having dinner Thursday."

"That's more like it. We can go shopping. I saw the sexiest dress at- "

"Slow down. The only reason I'm going out with him is to settle things. I don't want to mislead him into thinking that we're going to get involved. We're not."

"If you say so. Tell me, does he look as good as he did last night?"

Better. "I guess. I really didn't notice."

"Sure you didn't."

Thursday came quickly. Too quickly for Sydney. She'd been tempted to go shopping as Jennifer had suggested. But she decided not to. Buying a new outfit would suggest she was looking forward to the evening. She wasn't. It would also suggest it was something akin to a date. It wasn't.

Rusty rang Sydney's doorbell fifteen minutes earlier than expected.

"If you'd told me the name of the restaurant I could have met you there."

"Call me old fashioned but I like to pick my dates up."

"This is not a date."

"I'm a man. You're a woman. We're not related. We're not business partners. We're going out for dinner. Where I'm from that's called a date."

Just as they were about to leave her apartment he put his hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him. "You look beautiful. And before you get annoyed with me, I'm not flirting with you. I'm just stating the obvious."

Rusty chose an Italian restaurant. It was nice but far too intimate for Sydney's taste. So was the way he'd took to calling her Syd.

"I've been thinking about you," Rusty admitted. "Maybe not constantly but often enough.

"I've been thinking about you too. I mean I've been thinking about our predicament," she added hurriedly.

"Being with me is a predicament?"

"What do you call it?"

"I like to think of it as one of those memorable 'how we first met stories' that we can tell our kids and grand- kids."

Sydney had to force herself not to react to his choice of pronouns. She didn't know if it was deliberate on his part but he had an uncanny ability to say things that unnerved her.

"Hello Sydney."

Sydney looked up to see Ryan standing at their table. He wasn't as tall as Rusty. God, was she going to start comparing every man she met to Rusty.

"Rusty, this is an old friend of mine, Ryan Harrison. Ryan, this is..." Who? My fiancé? The man I picked up at a club?

"I'm Rusty." They shook hands.

"If you don't mind I'd like to speak to you in private." Though he was talking to Sydney he was looking at Rusty.

Rusty excused himself.

"Is he the one?"

"The one?" Sydney quirked a brow at Ryan.

"I heard that you're engaged," he said stiffly. "If he's the one, don't you think he's a little young?"

"He's over eighteen."

"Is he your fiancé?"

"I know I owe you an explanation. And I promise to give you one. Just not now." As soon as she settled things with Rusty she would call Ryan. Later they would laugh about all of this.

"I saw your friend leave," Rusty said, rejoining Sydney at the table. "He didn't look too happy."

"He heard that I'm engaged."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Yes." No. And he knew it.

"I guess going dancing is out of the question?"

"We need to go to my apartment. To talk," she added in way of an explanation.

"I didn't expect anything else?"

There was a brief, though it seemed much longer, moment of strained silence as they sat on Sydney's living room sofa.

"I-" they began simultaneously.

"You go first," she said.

"I'm sorry this situation is so awkward for you." He immediately saw that she'd misread his apology. "I'm not apologizing for being attracted to you Syd. But I am sorry if it makes you uncomfortable."

"Since we're being honest I want you to know how appreciative I am that you didn't take advantage of me or the situation. You could have. With that in mind I don't want to mislead you. I find you attractive also. But I'm not willing to act on that attraction."

"Why? Because of the guy at the restaurant?"

"Because I'm not looking to get involved with anyone at this point."

"The guy at the restaurant included?"

"Including Ryan."

Getting the answer he wanted, Rusty felt he could afford to be understanding. "I accept everything that

you're saying. But why can't we see each other occasionally? We like each other. You do like me a little, don't you?"

"A little. Maybe."

"And the two times we've been out, you've enjoyed yourself, haven't you?"

"I only remember this time."

Sydney didn't know how but they ended up talking for

hours. He seemed genuinely interested in everything about her. Her work. Her family. Her friends. There was

something about him that made him so very easy to talk to.

"I had know idea it was this late," Sydney hinted.

"I should leave. I know how early you get up." He

leaned forward to kiss her but she pulled back.

"I thought you said you understood my feelings."

"I do. But friends kiss." He brushed his lips across hers. It wasn't the way he wanted to kiss her. But it would have to do for now. "Good night Syd."

The shrill of the phone and alarm clock woke Sydney.

"Calm down mother and tell me why you're upset."

"Isn't that obvious?"

"The only thing that's obvious is that you're upset and I have no idea why."

"How would you feel if you had a daughter and that daughter got engaged and didn't see fit to tell you?"

Sydney sighed. "How did you find out about it?"

"Like every other stranger. I read it in the paper."

"Hold on a second." Sydney scanned through the paper until she found the society section.

A RELIABLE SOURCE REVEALED THAT LANE COSMETICS' PRESIDENT SYDNEY ST. JAMES IS ENGAGED TO A UNKNOWN HUNKY YOUNG MAN.

When Sydney picked up the receiver she was at a loss for words.

"Your father and I are coming into town today. We would like to meet--exactly what is my future son-in-law's

name?"

"Russell." The name just came out.

Sydney checked the time. It was a little after five. She knew Rusty was probably still in bed. But she didn't care. The phone rang several times before he picked up.

"I hope you were sleeping."

"Syd?"

"It's Sydney. And I want you in my office."

"When?"

"In fifteen minutes."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Fifteen minutes."

It was after nine and Sydney still hadn't heard from Rusty. She got Debbie to call his home number. No answer. Then she called Justins. He wasn't scheduled to work. Where the hell was he? Better yet, why wasn't he in her office.

Several minutes later Debbie buzzed her to say that Mr.Snyder was on the line.

"Where the hell are you?" Sydney snapped.

"I'm in the lab doing--"

Sydney hung up. When she got to the lab Rusty and some of the other male executives were working out. They were testing the new line of men's deodorant.

Rusty moved towards her and abruptly wrapped his sweaty arms around her. "This stuff works. Smell me."

Under the watchful eye of the others, Sydney managed to keep her composure. But she didn't have to for long, the others made up convenient excuses and left.

"Have you read the mornings paper?" Sydney didn't give him time to answer. She shoved the paper at him.

He read it then he flexed his biceps. "I think stud would've sounded better." He was laughing.

"This isn't amusing."

"Yes it is. The fact that an intelligent woman like yourself would care one way or the other about some nonsense in the society section is amusing."

"My parents didn't find any humor in it."

"Oops."

"Oops? Is that all you have to say?" As angry as she was with him, it didn't stop her from noticing, nothing short of blindness would, how incredibly sexy he looked.

She had never been one of those women who found the scent of a sweating male the least bit arousing. At least not until now. She stepped away from him.

Misreading her reaction, Rusty said, "I'll take a shower and meet you in your office."

CHAPTER THREE

"Before you accuse me of anything, let me say that I didn't tell anyone except your secretary that I was your fiancé. I didn't have an appointment to see you. And your secretary wasn't about to let me in your office. I had to tell her something."

Telling Debbie was like making a public announcement.

"I don't have time for this. My parents are coming into town today. And they want to have dinner with me and their future son-in-law tonight."

"What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? Don't you mean we?"

"You told them about me?"

"Your name sort of slipped out."

"A slip of the tongue. I understand." Rusty suppressed a smile. Sydney wasn't the type of woman to let anything slip. The fact that she told her parents that he was her fiancé meant something. Exactly what that something was, he didn't know. Yet. But he had a gut feeling that it was something good. "So your parents are expecting to meet me tonight?"

"If you hadn't lied to my secretary we wouldn't have to go through with this charade."

"Where's the lie? You asked me to marry you. And I accepted. You could have explained the situation to your secretary. But you didn't. You could have told your boyfriend. But you didn't. And quite frankly if I was your boyfriend you wouldn't have been able to brush me off as easily. I would have insisted on some answers."

"I told you that Ryan is not my boyfriend," she paused then said, "You would have insisted?" She laughed. "You're younger than I realized. Insisted?" She shook her head.

"A high powered executive like yourself, I'm surprised you haven't come up with a solution."

"I have. We're going to wait an appropriate amount of time then we'll announce that the engagement is off."

"Until then?"

"We're engaged. That is if it doesn't offend your high moral standards about lying."

Rusty ignored that. He knew he would be the loser if he attempted to get into a battle of words with Sydney. "Give me the key to your apartment."

"If you think we're going to be sharing an apartment during this time, you're mistaken."

"And you're mistaken if you think I want your keys for any other reason than to cook dinner for your parents."

Rusty stood in the middle of Sydney's living room with two bags of groceries in his arms staring back at the man and woman who was staring at him.

"Hi." He put the bags down and extended his hand.

The woman nodded. The man spoke, "Would you mind telling me what you're doing in my daughter's apartment?"

"I wasn't sure but I thought you were Syd's parents. She has your eyes Mr. St James. I'm Russell. My friends call me Rusty."

"Russell? Would that be as in Russell our future son- in-law? The one we didn't even know

existed until this morning?"

"Afraid so."

"We had no idea that our daughter was seriously dating anyone."

"Well, you know how Syd is."

Mrs. St James finally spoke, "Obviously we don't," she stated. "Our daughter detest the name Syd. And she's not an impulsive woman. Which makes me question why she would get engaged to a man her parents had never met. Or even heard of."

Mr. St James broke in, "Exactly how long have you known each other?"

Rusty felt like he was at a tennis match, his head going from side to side. "For a while." That was a safe answer.

"What's a while? One, two months?"

Rusty nodded.

Mr. St James persisted. "Which one is it, one or two months?"

"Actually it neither."

"Don't tell me it was one of those you saw each other from across a crowded room and fell in love," Mrs. St James said in exasperation.

Rusty had a feeling that he wasn't making a good impression on his future in-laws. "Not exactly." It may have been love at first sight for him. But Sydney was to drunk to see anything.

"Exactly what is going on between you and our daughter?" Mr. St James demanded.

"Can I be honest?"

"It would be refreshing." Mrs. St James answered.

She was good. She could even make an insult sound polite. Rusty told them everything. Well, not quite everything. He left out the part about how they met. Somehow it didn't seem appropriate to tell doting parents that their precious little girl had gotten drunk, picked up a strange man at a club and in a drunken stupor proposed marriage to him. "I want you to know that I care for Syd. But don't tell her. I told her that I liked her and she couldn't accept it. I can only imagine how she would react if she knew how much I liked her. And there's one other thing, she's uncomfortable about our age difference."

The St James' looked at each other then at Rusty.

"I'm six years her junior."

They both smiled.

"You're smiling. Is that good or bad?"

"Somewhere in between," Mrs. St James offered. "Sydney has always been so serious minded. She never takes time to have any fun. Work and a couple of friends is her life. The fact that she's involved with you and has allowed herself to be in this predicament, I think will be good for her."

Sydney quit work an hour earlier than usual. She thought about helping Rusty prepare dinner. But it was only a fleeting thought. Cooking was one of those things they didn't teach in business school.

When Sydney arrived at her apartment, she could hear laughter before she opened the door. She stepped back to check the apartment number.

Yes, it was indeed her apart- ment. She took a closer look at the people in the kitchen. Yes, those were her parents. And yes, that was her make believe fiancé. What had he done to her parents? They knew even less, if it was possible, about cooking than she did.

"You're early," Sydney said, kissing her parents.

"We wanted to surprise you," her father said.

"You succeeded." And then some. Sydney looked at her mother. "What do you have on?"

"Haven't you ever seen an apron?"

"Not on you."

"I have you know that Stephanie is very efficient in the kitchen," Rusty said. "Look how she sectioned the potatoes. Perfection." He kissed Sydney's mother on the cheek. "And Bill is a whizz at sautéeing."

"Mother actually cut up potatoes. And father sautéed?" Stephanie? Bill? Ryan had known her parents for years and he still called them Mr. and Mrs. St James. And he wouldn't even think about kissing her mother.

Sydney wondered if it was only her, but everyone seemed perfectly relaxed during dinner. Too relaxed.

"You don't have to look so guilt stricken," Sydney's father suggested. "Rusty explained everything to us."

Sydney looked at her father then at Rusty. "Rusty

explained everything?"

"I think it's romantic." Sydney's mother was smiling.

"Romantic?" Why was her mother smiling?

"The way he convinced your secretary he was your fiancé just so he could have a chance to see you again. I find the entire situation straight out of a romance novel. Only thing, in the novels the hero and the heroine always fall in love at the end. It would be a shame to break tradition."

When did her mother start reading romance novels?

"Rusty never did tell give us the details of your first meeting?"

Sydney and Rusty looked at each other.

"It was an intoxicating experience," Rusty offered.

Sydney kicked him on the leg.

"Tell us more," Stephanie prompted.

"You really don't want to hear it. It's just your run-of-the-mill first time two people met story."

"Yes we do," her parents said simultaneously.

Rusty told the story. "Sydney was out with Olivia and Jennifer at a jazz club. I was there. I saw Sydney when

she came in. And I, probably like the other guys there wanted to approach her. After getting up the nerve I asked her to dance. She took pity on me and accepted. We talked. And the next day I went to her office and you know the rest."

Sydney found herself just as enthralled as her parents were with Rusty's story.

After dinner Rusty and Sydney's mother did the dishes while Sydney talked with her father.

"I like Rusty."

Sydney looked towards the kitchen at Rusty and her mother. Obviously her mother liked him too.

"I was a little surprised that you'd chosen someone like Rusty. He's the exact opposite of Ryan and the other men you date."

"I haven't chosen Rusty. I thought he explained that our engagement is only temporary."

"He did. And I think he should be applauded. Some men would've taken advantage of the situation."

"Did he mention his age?"

Her father nodded. "If you have to judge him at all, judge him for the type of man he is. Not for his age. Just as I hope people judge you for your brilliant business mind. Not on the fact that you're a woman."

"I think I should say good night." Rusty shook Sydney's father's hand and kissed her mother.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Stephanie St James asked.

Rusty looked back at the kitchen. All the dishes were done. "I don't think so."

"Aren't you going to kiss Sydney?"

"Mother!"

"I'm twice your age and I can tell you that in my youth I never had to be reminded to kiss a woman good night."

Bill St James was looking at Rusty, smiling.

Rusty looked at Sydney. He realized her parents were giving him the chance to kiss Sydney again. Only this time, he would kiss her the way he'd wanted to from the first time he'd laid eyes on her. The way he'd wanted to in her office.

Rusty's mouth claimed Sydney's in a slow, consuming kiss. His lips were warm, full and covered hers completely. "Good night Syd," he whispered into her ear.

Sydney turned to look at her parents. They were look- ing at her smiling. This was insane. Ryan had been trying for years to get her parents to like him. At best they tolerated him. They'd known Rusty less than twenty- four hours and they were already his champion. But who was she to criticize her parents. She'd known Rusty for only hours before she asked him to marry her. Insanity must run in her family.

Rusty stood outside Sydney's door, smiling. He was remembering the way Sydney trembled when he kissed her.

Sydney couldn't believe she'd managed to work her way through the pile of work on her desk in such a short time. She also couldn't explain why she woke up so full of energy. Of course there was an off chance that it had something to do with last night's success with her parents. Or if she was willing to be honest, which she wasn't at the moment, maybe she was still reeling from Rusty's kiss. Sydney knew she wasn't exactly a social butterfly but she did manage an occasional date and to have what Jennifer referred to as a dry social life. But never on any of those infrequent dates had a kiss effected her the way Rusty's had.

Returning her thoughts back to work, Sydney remembered that she was expected in the conference room. Now that the new line of men's cosmetics was ready to go to market they needed to find a model.

After interviewing some fifteen models or so, Sydney and her staff still hadn't found the right man. What they needed was a man of the nineties. A man who could relate to men and women. Someone women found gorgeous but approachable. Someone men would want as a friend. Sydney was beginning to wonder if such a man existed.

Kelly, Sydney's assistant, came into the room smiling. "I've found the perfect guy. He's not a professional model. But he's exactly what we're looking for."

Sydney was flabbergasted when Rusty came in behind

Kelly. Everyone smiled, everyone that is except for Sydney and Kelly. "What's going on?" Kelly asked.

"You don't know who this is do you?" Debbie asked.

"If we're lucky he'll be our model for the men's line."

"He's the boss's fiancé."

Kelly looked at Rusty and then at Sydney. "Well, I've been out of town. How was I suppose to know."

"We have to talk. In private." Rusty had Sydney by the hand, leading her out the door.

"The last time I was here, I ended up testing deodorant. Now some woman practically tackles me in the hall and insist that I'm the man she's been looking for. I don't think so."

"I'm just as surprised as you are." Sydney took in his appearance. Levis, boots and a chambray shirt, he

definitely had the gorgeous part down. And she knew from experience that he had charisma. "Kelly may be right. You may be what we're looking for."

"Am I what you're looking for?"

"Didn't I just say you were."

"I'm not talking business."

"Will you consider being our model?"

"I'm a chef. I don't have time to go around selling deodorant."

"It's more than deodorant. It's a full line of men's cosmetics. And what if you agreed to be our print model. That way it wouldn't interfere with your job as a chef."

"Explain it to me."

"Your face would be in the magazines and on the bill-boards. For out of town public appearances we'd use another

model. You would only have to come in once, maybe twice a week for photo shoots."

"I can't see myself posing while some guy takes

pictures of me."

"Our photographer is a female. And think of all the extra money."

"It may be hard for you business types to understand but having lots of money isn't everyones life's ambition."

"Tell me what it will take for you to be our model."

"A date."

"A date?"

"A real date with you. Tonight."

"All I have to do is agree to go out with you tonight. That's all?"

"You're underestimating your value."

"I'll have a contract ready for your signature tomorrow."

"Dress casual."

Rusty stared into the mirror as he shaved. Same old face except his eyes were different. "You're falling for her," they said, no, they screamed at him.

Sydney was dressed in jeans and boots and ready twenty minutes earlier than need be. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn jeans. Nor could she remember the last time she sat waiting for a man to pick her up. Only to her- self would she admit to looking forward to going out with Rusty.

"Where are we going?" Sydney wasn't familiar with the section of town they were in. "To dinner."

Dinner turned out to be at a Drive-In. When the

waitress came out to get their order Rusty took it upon himself to order for both of them. "Two cheeseburgers.

No onions." He winked at Sydney. "Fries and two shakes,

vanilla and chocolate. And lots of ketchup."

When the waitress left Sydney said, "Since you don't know me very well, I'll look over the fact that you took it upon yourself to order for me. But I do question your

choice of food. As a chef aren't you concerned about all the fat and grease we're going to ingest. Not to mention what this delicious meal is going to do to our cholesterol level."

"Tonight we're going to have fun. We're not going to be serious and worry about cholesterol levels and how bad junk food is for you. Besides, if anyone should be worried, it's me. My body is the one that's going on public display," he reminded her.

To Sydney's surprise the food was good. Even though she got ketchup under her nails and Rusty insisted on mixing their shakes together, this was the first time in a long time since she'd enjoyed eating out.

"I asked you a question earlier today. You didn't answer."

She hedged. "Really?"

"I asked you if I was your type. My exact words were, Am I what you're looking for? You didn't answer."

"I didn't think an answer was necessary." Suddenly the fries she was enjoying began to lose their taste.

Sydney was astonished when he took her to the planetarium. "How did you know I enjoyed astronomy? Or should I add psychic to your list of talents?"

"You mother mentioned it."

The fact that Rusty remembered and would make this part of their date said a great deal about the kind of man he was. But she wouldn't tell him. With Debbie and every other female in the building fawning over him, his head was big enough without her adding to it. "If you ask me, I think you did this because I'm probably the cheapest date you've ever had."

"I can assure you the word cheap doesn't come to mind when I think of you, which has gone from often to constantly."

Sydney attempted, to no avail, to teach Rusty about the

stars. But he couldn't concentrate. There was nothing in the sky as heavenly as the person sitting beside him. He wanted to tell Sydney that. But she'd probably accuse him of handing

her a line. And as intelligent as she was, this time Sydney would be wrong.

Dinner at a Drive-In and a visit to the planetarium. Sydney could hardly wait to find out what else he had planned for the evening. When they pullled into the parking lot of Justins,

Sydney assumed he was going to surprise her with some rich, chocolatey dessert. She'd assumed wrong again. They got out of his car and into a bright red convertible.

"Before you ask, I'm not committing grand theft auto," Rusty assured her. "The car belongs to a friend of mine. And what am I doing? I talked to Jennifer. And she told me about your fantasy of driving down the highway in a red convertible with the night air in your face and the wind in your hair."

Sydney blushed. She wondered if Jennifer had mentioned the man in her fantasy. Knowing Jennifer, she had. "So much for the hair." She combed her fingers through her short mane.

Rusty took the clasp from his hair. "You can have a vicarious thrill."

Sydney did. It was the most fun she'd had in ages. She realized that her time with Rusty involved many "first" and "most".

"I can't stay." Sydney looked around Rusty's living room. For a bachelor his apartment was meticulous.

"You can relax Syd. Like I said earlier, I'm not trying to get you into bed. Though I don't want you to think the thought haven't entered my mind. Occasionally. Ok, I lie. Frequently."

"It would be ridiculous for us to even consider getting involved." Sydney joined him on the sofa.

"Aside from you being uncomfortable with the slight age difference, why shouldn't we get involved?"

"I'm not bothered by the age difference. At least not as much as I was." That was thanks to the conversation she had with her father. "What bothers me is that we have absolutely nothing in common."

"I don't know about that. What kind of music do you like?"

"On occasion I go to the symphony."

"I listen to Country and Western. What about movies?" Rusty asked.

"Dramas."

"I like to comedies. Books?"

"Mysteries."

"I read the comics. Just kidding." Rusty laughed. "Sports?"

"Tennis."

"Football."

"We should stop," Sydney suggested. "This is even worse than I imagined."

"One more thing. Do you like me?"

Sydney answered before thinking. "Yes."

Rusty slid closer beside her, their legs touching. His hand went to her face, turning her to face him. "As for as I'm concerned that last answer outweighs all the others."

Rusty kissed her...or she kissed him. Sydney didn't know who had kissed whom. But they were kissing passionately. Her body moved even closer against his, while her hands weaved through his hair.

They were breathless when the kiss ended.

"I should go now," Sydney said.
"Are you sure?"
"No, but I'll go anyway."
Sydney was in bed when the phone rang.
"Did I wake you?"
Sydney recognized Rusty's voice. "No."
"If I forgot to say it earlier, I had a great time tonight."
"You might have mentioned it four or five times."
"What about you?" Rusty asked. "Did you enjoy yourself?"
"I had a nice time."
"You had a nice time? That's all?"
"What is it that you want me to say?"
"Anything but nice."
"I had a great time tonight. Are you happy?"
"Delirious." Rusty hung up smiling.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Explain something to me," Rusty said to the photographer. "You taking pictures of me in my boxers, what does that have to do with selling cologne? I mean, come on Nikki, what am I selling here? Cologne or underwear?"

"Neither. You're selling yourself. The majority of men's cologne is purchased by wives and girlfriends. That's where you and your body comes in. What woman wouldn't want to close her eyes and fantasize that the man in her life looks like and smells like the gorgeous hunk in the ads."

Sydney stood at the door watching. Rusty was without a doubt the most intriguing man she'd ever known. He aroused her brain, her soul and yes, her body.

"I stopped by to see how things were going," Sydney explained when Rusty noticed her.

"Things aren't going all that well. Isn't that right Nikki?"

"If you say so." "I'm a little stiff. But now that you're here, I've got an idea." Rusty walked behind Sydney, wrapping his arms around her. "Snap away."

Stiff? Nikki thought to herself. The man was a natural in front of the camera.

"Don't," Sydney ordered.

Nikki looked from Rusty to Sydney. Considering that it was Sydney who signed her paycheck, she didn't snap any pictures.

"I thought if we took a couple of pictures together, it might loosen me up, help me to relax. I just want to do my best for you and the company."

"I'll help. But on one condition. You change into something a little more--just more would be nice."

While Rusty changed, Sydney had a chance to talk with Nikki. As she suspected the photo shoot was going fine. And as she also expected, Rusty was a natural. How could anyone who looked the way he did not be photogenic.

Sydney and Nikki's conversation came to an abrupt stop hen Rusty came from behind the partition. He had on a navy double breasted suit.

"You're speechless," Rusty said, looking from Sydney to Nikki. "Is that good or bad?"

"Good," Nikki whispered. "Real good."

"What about you Syd. You think I look all right?"

"You look nice."

Sydney only allowed a few pictures to be taken of Rustyand herself before insisting that she needed to get back to her office. But before leaving, she paused at the door, looking at Rusty. She was hit with a sudden realization. She liked Rusty Snyder. A lot. Maybe too much.

"I shouldn't be telling you this Rusty but I think the boss likes you," Nikki commented after the shoot was over.

"What's make you say that? Did she say something to you?"

"Like she's going to confide in me."

"Well, what then? Don't tell me, women's intuition?"

"This is the first time since I've been here that she's showed up for a shoot. And what do you have against women's intuition?"

Rusty smiled. "The photos of Syd and me, could you make some extra copies?" He kissed Nikki on the cheek.

"And I have nothing against women's intuition. In fact I'm hoping that yours is right on the mark."

Nikki shook her head. Poor Sydney. She wondered if they'd taught her in business school how to handle a man like Rusty.

Sydney arrived at the restaurant ten minutes ahead of time. In case her date showed up earlier than expected, she wanted to be there. Though technically it wasn't a date. She was having a business dinner with John Walker. He owned a line of exclusive department stores. And with a little luck Sydney was hoping to persuade him to carry her new men's line.

When John had suggested they meet at Justins Sydney had immediately suggested they try another restaurant. But he'd insisted and Sydney couldn't very well object. What would her reason be. "I rather not because my make-believe fiancé is the chef there."

"You look great," John said. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"I just got here."

During dinner Sydney pitched her men's line to John. She explained how she'd decided to use an unknown to be her model. And how so far all the test marketing suggested that she had a winner.

"Who is he?"

"I've decided to wait and introduce the model when the new line is unveiled at the gala. Naturally you'll be get- ting an invitation."

"Sounds intriguing. What can you tell me about the men's line?"

"Ours is not your typical men's line of cologne, after- shave and deodorant. This is the nineties. And our line is reflective of this. Men are more aware and more conscious of their appearance. I'm not saying that they spend as much money or time as women do. But in comparison to a year ago men are paying more attention to grooming. And I'm not just talking about models and other men in the profession. I mean your everyday Joe on the street. With this in mind, our line consists of the usual plus more. More being natural spay cologne, bath and shower gel, shampoo and conditioner, lotions and talc and a personalized manicure set. In essence, a complete line of accessories for men."

"Have you come up with a name for the line?"

"Yes, but that too is to be unveiled at the gala."

Sydney's instincts were telling her that John was interested. Very interested.

When the waiter returned to their table John requested that he give the chef their compliments. Sydney breathed a sigh of relief. For a second she thought John was going to ask to speak to the chef in person. She relaxed too quickly. She looked up to see Rusty coming towards their table.

"I'm your chef Russell Synder. Are you the couple who appreciated my cooking?"

"Yes we are," John said, extending his hand to Rusty. "The meal was excellent."

"I'm glad that you enjoyed it."

Seeing that Rusty was just standing there, staring at Sydney, John asked if he had a moment to join them.

Rusty pulled up a seat. "Forgive me for staring ma'am but don't I know you from somewhere?" He continued to stare at Sydney. "Now I know. You look like my fianceé."

Sydney kicked him. "You know what they say about everyone having a double."

"That's a coincidence," John offered. "Sydney is also engaged. But just like her new business venture she's keeping him a secret too."

"Wouldn't it be something if I looked a little like her intended. What do you think ma'am, do I look anything like your fiancé?" He moved his legs out of reach of

Sydney's foot. Just in case.

"Afraid not."

When Rusty got home from the restaurant the phone was ringing. He knew who it was.

"Hi Syd."

"Don't hi me. And don't call me Syd. I want you to explain your asinine behavior at the restaurant."

"Is that something like being an ass?"

"Close enough."

"You're right. I was being asinine."

"How would you like it if I interfered while you were working?"

"You-"

She cut him off. "You'd be as annoyed as I am."

"You're right."

"Why are you agreeing with me?" "Because everything you've said is true. And my only excuse is youth and stupidity. Which I'm told goes hand in hand."

"Your age is a handy excuse but it had nothing to do with the way you behaved. You acted like a jealous lover."

"You're right again. When I came out and saw you with John the first thing I assumed was that you were out on a date with him. But...if someone, and I'm too much of a gentleman to name names, had called and informed me that she was bringing a business date to the restaurant I wouldn't have had to act like an ass."

"And why is it that you think I have to inform you of my whereabouts?"

"How soon they forget. I'm your fiancé. Remember?"

Like he would let her forget.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"This is the main reason why I frown upon co-workers getting personally involved. Very seldom are they able to separate their personal relationship from their professional one."

"I'll quit. I don't care about being a model. I only did it for you."

"Our relationship is not real. Remember?"

Like she would let him forget.

"We're having a gala to introduce the new men's line. You're expected to attend."

"What time should I pick you up?" "Aren't you being presumptuous?"

"It may not be real to you but to the rest of Lake Gaston we're engaged."

"Seven. And it's black tie."

The following days were hectic for Sydney. Along with her usual mountain of daily work, she had to be positive that the gala would go off without a hitch.

The closer it got to the gala the more Sydney seemed to dislike the logo and design of the

cologne bottle. She knew there wasn't time to change it. Not that she really wanted to. She was nervous. She had every right to be. If the men's line was as successful as she thought it would be, it was going to prove that the Chairmen of the Board had made an excellent choice when he named her President of Lane's Cosmetics.

She went over her speech trying to prepare herself for any questions the press may toss at her. But when dealing with the press she knew from past experience that there was no such thing as truly being prepared. It would be nice if she could get through the whole evening without having to discuss her personal life. But she knew that wasn't going to happen.

The intercom buzzed.

"Yes Debbie?"

"I wanted to remind you that you have a reservation at Justins in fifteen minutes."

Much to Sydney's dismay Jennifer and Olivia insisted on having lunch at Justins. The reason why was obvious.

"Tell us everything," Jennifer said, smiling.

"The gala is in a couple of days. I think everything is under control. But-"

"You know we're proud of you," Jennifer broke in. "As with everything else that you do, the men's line is going to be a huge success. Now that that is said, tell us about the good stuff."

"What good stuff?"

"About you and Rusty," Olivia answered.

"What's to tell?"

"Oh please. We already know that he's great in the kitchen. How about the bedroom?"

"How would I know? You seem to forget that my re-

lationship with him is merely for show. As soon as the

men's line is underway we're going to make an announcement that the engagement is off. We'll stress that it was a

mutual and amicable decision."

"This is exactly what we were afraid of. Isn't that right Olivia?"

She nodded. "Just yesterday Jennifer mentioned her concern to me."

"Concern about what?"

"You're beginning to sound like your old self again."

"And exactly what was wrong with the old me?"

"In a word. BORING."

"Jennifer!"

"You know it's true. Before Rusty came into your life your idea of a good time was finishing up at work early so you could hurry home and curl up with the latest issue of Business Week. And the pièce de résistance, catching the entire MacNeil, Lehrer report."

Reluctantly Sydney told about Rusty and her dinner at the drive-in. Their ride in the convertible. And their trip to the planetarium. She left out the part about the kiss. She left it out because she didn't want them to know how a simple little kiss had completely thrown her. But therein lay the problem. To her there was nothing simple about that kiss. And it may have been little but it had such an enormous effect on her.

Olivia and Jennifer exchanged knowing looks.

"What?"

"You're falling for him," Jennifer stated matter-of- factly.

Sydney looked to Olivia. Olivia, unlike Jennifer, was sane.

"I agree with Jennifer."

"That's absurd."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't known him long enough. He's younger than I am. And we have nothing in common."

Jennifer shook her head. "What does time have to do with anything? I myself am a firm believer in love at first sight. And I don't have to tell you that age is unimpor- tant. Unless of course he was a minor. Then you might would have a problem. And why is it that only men get to rob the cradle? Not that that's what you're doing. But if you were, whose business is it anyway? And as far as having nothing in common, you have the greatest common denominator. You like each other."

That was what Rusty had said.

"Jennifer is right. If only you could have seen your face while you were talking about him. Even though you wanted us to believe you had a lousy time on your date, that's not what your face or your voice reflected."

Before they left Jennifer suggested that Sydney check to see if Rusty was working. She didn't. She may not be enlightened about the dating rules of the nineties. But nineties or sixties she wasn't about to go chasing after any man. Including, and particularly, one Russell Snyder.

The night of the gala Rusty arrived at Syndey's place twenty minutes to seven. He knew this was an important

night for her and he didn't want her to be late.

He rang the doorbell and Ryan answered. He was wearing a black tux.

"Sydney is getting dressed. Have a seat if you want."

What he wanted was an explanation.

"I thought I heard the door-" Sydney stopped in mid sentence. It wasn't that she found herself with two dates. What caused her speechlessness was Rusty. In his white dinner jacket he defined handsome.

"Excuse us for a moment Ryan. Rusty may I see you in the kitchen."

"The bedroom," he corrected taking her by the hand. "Before you explain, let me say that you are breathtaking." He sniffed her neck. "And God, you smell so good."

She was glad that he noticed. She was unsure when Jennifer chose the dress. She thought then and now that it was too clingy, the slit was too high and the back too low. But she shouldn't complain. In comparison to the other outfit Jennifer had selected, this one was ultra conserva- tive.

"Where have you been?"

Rusty checked his watch. "I'm early."

"I mean where have you been. I haven't seen you in days." Ten days to be exact. But who was counting.

"Giving you some time. The last time we spoke you weren't exactly thrilled with me. And knowing how you don't like to be pushed, I stepped back."

"While you were trying to give me some space, I was thinking that you were trying to give

me a hint."

"A hint?"

"That you didn't want to go with me to the gala."

"I don't know why you would think that. I was the one who convinced you that we should go together. And now that that is settled, which one of us gets the pleasure of

telling Ryan to take a hike?"

"Neither."

"Don't even think it." Rusty dropped on the bed. His fiancé, himself and some other guy. Something was terribly wrong with that picture.

He was pouting. Sydney wanted to laugh but she stopped herself. "Please."

"No. Out of the question."

When they, Sydney, Rusty and Ryan, arrived everyone was there.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. And members of the press." There was laughter throughout the room. Off to a roaring start Sydney told herself. "As you know we're here to unveil Lane's Cosmetics new men's line." Sydney slowly began to remove the piece of red velvet. Then she stopped. "Unless of course there's something else you would rather see." More laughter. She unveiled a beautifully designed black bottle embossed with the word HERO in gold letters.

"Before I take any questions let me say that a sample kit has been especially prepared for everyone. Enjoy."

"Who came up with the name HERO?"

"I did. These are the nineties. And today's woman is strong, self-supportive, smart and the list goes on and on. But with all this going for us I truly believe that some of us still want or perhaps secretly fantasize about a hero. A man who has the ability to emanate masculinity and sensitivity at the same time. A man who would and do gives all in the name of love."

"That might appeal to a woman buying the cologne for the man in her life. But what about the man? Where's the appeal?"

"It's quite simple. A man wants to be a hero for that special woman in his life. Be it his mother, his daughter, his wife, his girlfriend." A long round of applause followed.

"We at Lane's Cosmetics believe we have found the perfect man to represent the new men's line. I'd like to

introduce you to Russell Snyder." She gestured for Rusty to join her. "When I first met Russell he told me to call him Rusty, that all his friends did. I'm not a betting woman but I'd lay odds that very few people call him Russell."

"Aren't you Ms. St James' fiancé?"

"Yes I am." Rusty said it with determination.

"Is he your hero?"

"Yes he is." Sydney said it without hesitation.

"If I am Syd's hero, I think it's only fair that we introduce a new perfume. I would name it everything." He turned to look at Sydney. "Because you are darling, every- thing to me." And with that he gently brushed her lips with his finger.

Sydney and Rusty danced the first dance. After that they kind of lost sight of each other in the crowd. Everytime she was able to locate him in the crowd, some woman had attached herself to

him. It was never the same woman. A redhead, a blonde and a burnette. Different women but all were blessed with the same attributes-tall, voluptuous and gorgeous.

When Sydney did manage to speak to him it was only briefly. "I know it's a difficult task but try, please try to remember that you're engaged. To me." She walked off.

The evening turned out even better than she'd hoped for. If the buzz around the room was any indication the HERO line was going to be a huge success. But she realized the real and only test that counted was sells. Would the consumer buy it. And when they did would they like it.

On the way home the car was perilously quiet and reek- ing with tension. Rusty couldn't figure out what he'd done.

"Are you going to tell me why you're upset?"

"We'll discuss it when we get home."

"Yes ma'am."

The instant they walked into her apartment the conver- sation began.

"Try to remember that you're engaged. What kind of crack was that?" He took off his jacket and tie.

"The way you were flirting with every female there I thought you'd forgotten you had a fiancée."

"I was not flirting nor was I the least bit interested in any other woman there. I was being nice. I didn't wantto offend any of your business associates." He pulled her down on the couch beside him. "I stood before a room of strangers and told them how I felt about you. Does that sound like a man who's forgotten about the woman he loves?"

Sydney refused to acknowledge what he'd said.

"I love you Syd." He grabbed his jacket and left.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sydney had to force herself to concentrate. Of all the times and places for her thoughts to wander, this wasn't it. This was the first board meeting since the new line had been launched. Exactly three weeks. That's how long it had been since she'd seen Rusty. And here she was taught to believe that it was women who held a grudge. Concentrate she ordered herself. The new line was doing extremely well. Sells were high. And everyone praised her decision in hiring Rusty as the model. Sydney appreciated the accolades but cautioned them that this was only the initial stages. There was always an interest in a new product. Whether it continued to be popular after the publicity wore off would be the determining factor. Though she preferred to deal with facts, her instincts were telling her that the HERO line was going to be a mainstay in the cosmetic industry.

Relieved that the meeting was over Sydney made a hurried retreat to her office. She wouldn't admit it but she'd hoped that she would finally have some word from Rusty. He'd been in for several shoots during the past weeks but he hadn't stopped by to see her. Once she had been looking out her window when she caught a glimpse of him going to his car. Maybe she'd been overly harsh to him the night of the gala. Maybe he hadn't been flirting. And even if he was, did she have the right to get angry. That was the strange thing about jealousy. It wasn't logical. But for that matter what emotion was? Maybe their disagreement had been for the best. It proved to her what she already knew. There was no way she could have a serious relationship with him. Not with a man who thought the way to settle a disagreement was by avoidance. But what was her excuse? She could've contacted him. But she hadn't. Was he doing the same as she was? Waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Your next appointment is here," Debbie informed.

Sydney looked at her appointment calendar. The name Mr. Jones was penciled in. It didn't ring a bell. "Send him in."

Sydney showed no emotions when Rusty walked into her office. "Playing games?" she asked sternly.

"Having some fun," Rusty offered. "Something you obviously know nothing about. But now that we're together, that's all going to change. Wait right here."

"This is my office. I'm not going anywhere."

He smiled. "Now that's the Syd I know and love." He returned with flowers. Actually one flower. A single yellow rose with a red tip. Her favorite if his memory served him correctly. Why one? He figured the guys she usually dated like Ryan, more and likely brought the entire florist along when they came to see her. He wanted to be different. He wanted to be special to her.

"Thank you."

"I'm not finished. There's more." From his jacket pocket he took a tiny bag of chocolate kisses. "They're almost but not quite as good as your kisses. Though unfortunately I've only had the pleasure of two of your kisses."

"I assume that all of this is leading up to something."

Rusty handed her some pictures. They were baby pictures of himself. Flowers, candy and baby pictures. All the things that would guarantee to make a woman forgive a man. At least that's what his aunt Sara had told him.

"The gifts are nice but why don't you tell me why you are here."

"I've been doing some thinking. And-"

"I would imagine you were able to squeeze in a great deal of thinking in three weeks time."

"And I missed you too."

"You knew how to reach me."

"Like I said, I've been doing some thinking and I've come to an important decision that I need to discuss with you."

"I'm listening."

"I don't think your office is the place to have this particular discussion. Have dinner with me tonight."

"I'm sorry but I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. I'm going out of town."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure."

Rusty didn't say anything. He simply got up and left.

Before Sydney could react to him leaving he was coming back into her office.

"You were going to leave town without telling me?"

"I was going to get Debbie to call you."

"Debbie? You were going to get your secretary to call your fiancé and tell him what? That you and Ryan were going out of town for a romantic tryst."

"Who said anything about Ryan?"

"So you deny that you're going out of town for a romantic tryst. Just that Ryan isn't the lucky guy.

Exactly how many more men excluding Ryan and myself are you seeing?"

There was that word again. When did he start using words like tryst. "Not that it's any of your business, I'm not seeing anyone. Unlike some people, I remember that I'm supposed to be engaged."

"Are you implying that I've forgotten?"

"Let me think about it. I haven't seen you in three weeks. You've been in the building three or four times anddidn't make any effort to see me. No, I'm not implying that you've forgotten. I'm stating it."

"And what about yourself? You could've contacted me."

"This is obviously getting us no where."

"Just tell me where you're going and with whom."

"We're going to my cabin."

"We?"

"Olivia, Jennifer, another friend and myself. And before you ask, the other friend is female."

"I can imagine the conversation when the topic turns to men. You'll probably complain about what dogs we all are."

"Probably."

"Have you given any thought to what I told you at your apartment?"

She knew instantly what he was referring to. "You said so much."

"I know a lot of people toss those words around casually. But I'm not one of those people. Not one of those men. I meant it when I said it in your apartment and I mean it now when I say it in your office. I love you. I'm in love with you."

Like the first time, Sydney didn't respond.

"What's going on here Syd? The first time I told you, I thought you thought I wasn't being serious. Now that you know that I am, you still don't say anything. I'm no expert on the matter but aren't you at least suppose to say something?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I love you too would be the preferred answer but I'll settle for anything."

"I'll think about what you said, about us while I'm away."

"How long will that be?"

"A couple of days. No more than a week."

Rusty walked around her desk, removed her pen from her hand, and pulled her up from her chair. She felt the warmth of his breath as he stood close but not touching her. "I want you to think about this too while you're away." He brought her hand to his lips. With the lightest of touch he kissed her fingers, each one of them, then nibbled at the tips, his eyes never leaving hers. His eyes never leaving any doubt to what he wanted. "I do love you."

It had been some time since Sydney had been at the cabin. Which translated into them getting lost. Instead of getting there when they'd planned they ended up arriving two hours later. Jennifer thought it was amusing. She'd always thought it was men who got lost and refused to ask for directions. Sydney said it was her cabin and that she didn't need some stranger at some gas station giving her directions.

After dinner they all sat around the fireplace enjoying a brandy. When the conversation turned to men, Sydney remembered what Rusty said and laughed. "I know we've been gone less than a couple of hours but I'm already having fun," Marcia said, pouring herself another drink.

Jennifer shook her head. "What I think is that you're so grateful to be away from the husband and kids that you'd think anything was fun."

"I can't argue with you. I love being a wife and a mother but sometimes you need a break from it all."

"You shouldn't talk this way. Jennifer and Sydney will never get married," Olivia said to Marcia.

"I think I have an affliction known mostly to men. Fear of commitment," Jennifer said. "I can be in a relationship that is going along fine. But the moment things take a serious turn, I'm out of there. I find some way to end it."

"You need help." For the first time since they'd arrived, Sydney felt herself relaxing.

"This from the woman who eats and sleeps her job. From the woman who has a young stud falling all over himself for her and she refuses to do anything about it. Or should I say anything

with him."

"You know what you're doing Jennifer. Getting sex and feelings mixed up."

"Dear dear Marcia. You're married. I didn't think you still had a sex life." Jennifer ducked as Marcia flung a pillow at her.

"I can't speak for all married women but my sex life isterrific."

Sydney looked at Olivia. She was surprised. Normally she was quiet when their conversation took an intimate turn.

"I love you. I'm in love with you Syd." Those words, Rusty's words, lulled Sydney into a peaceful sleep.

"I don't know how you stand it," Marcia said to Sydney. "When a man looks as good as your fiancé looks you have to constantly worry about him being unfaithful. And you know that women are going to be after him."

"Ugly or good looking, men cheat," Jennifer offered.

"I trust Rusty. And the fact that women find him attractive doesn't bother me. I may be crazy but I like the idea that the man I'm engaged to is appealing to a lot of women. I just think to myself, lucky me."

After three days of being at the cabin, after 72 hours of female bonding, Sydney had had enough. Besides resting and relaxing, which she had done, her other reason for

coming to the cabin was to think about Rusty and her relationship. That she hadn't done. During the three days she'd listened while her friends alternately said how lucky she was to have a man like Rusty in her life, and at the same time, how much a headache it must be. She valued her friends advice but she knew that this was one decision that she would have to make on her own.Sydney came to a decision on the drive home. Or rather the answer came to her. Make believe fiancé or not, she wanted Rusty in her life. What more was there to think about.

Rusty was waiting for Sydney at her apartment.

Actually he was sitting in front of her door. When he saw Sydney walking towards him, he couldn't tell if her look was one of surprise or dismay.

"How was your trip?" He took her bags as she unlocked the door.

"Enlightening. How did you know I was coming back

today?"

Rusty took the bags into the bedroom. She was back two days early. She'd cut her trip short. What did it mean? She'd missed him? And hurried back to see him? She'd decided she didn't need any time to think about them.

Because there wasn't a them to think about. And she'd come back to tell him. To put him out of his misery. Believing that the latter was true, Rusty braced himself as he walked to the living room and joined Sydney on the couch.

"You never said how you knew I was coming back today?"

"Debbie."

"I-" they began simultaneously.

"You go first," Rusty said.

"I know that I promised you that I would think about things, about us while I was away."

"And you didn't?"

"I realized that I didn't need to."

Not as prepared as he'd thought to hear the truth, Rusty excused himself and went to the bathroom. He stood in the bathroom staring at himself in the mirror. How could he ever think that a woman like Sydney would ever take him seriously. That a woman like her would want a relationship with him. The only reason he was in Sydney's life was because of alcohol. Specifically, Sydney's low tolerance for it.

Rusty had been in the bathroom for so long that Sydney got concerned. She knocked on the door and it opened.

Rusty was sitting on the edge on the bathtub. Sydney joined him.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Hiding."

"From what?"

"The truth."

"Is the truth that bad?"

"You remember the day I came to your office. The same day you went on your trip?" She nodded. "I told you I had been thinking and that I'd come to a major decision about us. Stupidly enough I thought you cared about me. And I wanted to ask if we could be together."

Sydney was dumbfounded. He'd been pursuing her just to lead up to this. Just to ask her to sleep with him. "I don't believe this."

"I don't know why you're so surprised. Everyone believes it anyway. I don't know what your friends think about it but I got the impression that your parents were approving."

"You discussed this with my parents? And they were approving?"

"Your father said that it would be good for you?"

There was no way possible that they could be talking about the same thing. "Exactly what do you mean when you say you want us to be together?"

"I mean I want to marry you," he paused, then started laughing. "You thought I was asking-"

"Never mind what I thought. And I fail to see the humor. It's not everyday or year that a woman is proposed to in the bathroom. On live TV maybe. Or some other inventive or imaginative place but certainly not the

bathroom. So forgive me if I thought you were proposing something else."

"Are you going to give me an answer?"

"No."

"No, you're not going to answer or no, you won't marry me?"

"The latter."

"Why?"

"There are a million reasons why we can't get married now."

"Is there someone else?"

"No."

"You don't find me attractive?"

"You know the answer to that."

"And you say there are a million reasons why we can't get married. You're having a hard time coming up with one."

"In less than twenty four hours we met and got engaged. To try and take that and turn it into something real would be unrealistic."

"I grant you that the way we became engaged was a little unorthodox. But now there is nothing unrealistic about my feelings for you. I love you. It's the first time I've been in love. And if you think I'm put off by you saying no, I'm not."

"You proposing and me refusing, where if anywhere does that leave us?"

"Technically you didn't refuse me. You said that we couldn't get married now. Yes, I heard that. To me that means there's a possibly that we will get married later. And to make later happen sooner I've decided to court you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a full fledge courtship starting right now." He took her by the hand and led her into the dining room. "As you can see I've already set the table for dinner."

"How did you get into my apartment?"

"Did you forget that the doorman thinks that we're engaged."

After the main course they went to the living room fordessert. Whereupon he commenced to feed her strawberry cheesecake. Sydney was embarrased. No man had ever fed her before.

"You have a smidgen of strawberry on the comer of your mouth." Before Sydney could use her napkin Rusty took his thumb and wiped it away. Then he licked his thumb. It was a simple gesture. But it nearly undid Sydney.

"While I do the dishes I want you to sit here and enjoy yourself. Here's the latest issue of Business Week. And I taped MacNeil/Lehrer for you."

When Sydney realized that she'd been reading the same paragraph over and over, she closed the magazine and laid it beside her. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Rusty. Marriage. Rusty wanted to marry her.

Rusty turned around and caught Sydney staring at him. He smiled at her. And then joined her on the living room couch.

"You never did tell me about your trip." He had her feet in his lap.

"You name was mentioned once or twice."

"You were talking about me?" He removed her shoes and socks.

"Mostly my friends."

"What did they say?" He was massaging her foot.

"That I was lucky to have you in my life. And-"

"I knew there was a reason why I liked your friends."

"And that men who look like you were more apt to be unfaithful."

"That's nonsense." He moved closer to her, pressing her against the corner of the couch.

"Is it?"

"You know it is." His eyes were on her mouth. "I want to kiss you." And he did.

He fitted his lips over hers until they met in a

perfect embrace. His tongue flirted with hers, darting, retreating, flicking hers again and again until she answered his challenge.

When the kiss ended, Rusty laid his head on her lap, his breath coming in great, ragged inhalations. He closed his eyes.

Because of her work Sydney had always held herself aloof from her dates. Even Ryan. She knew that it wouldn't be fair to let some man believe that he could compete with her work. Her work would always come first. But there was Rusty. And there was the way he made her feel.

She leaned over and kissed his eyes.

With his eyes still closed he smiled and said, "As soon as you agree to marry me I want to take you home to meet my aunt and uncle. I've already told them about you."

She traced the outline of his lips. There was only one word to describe them. Sensual. "What have you told them?"

"That you're going to be my wife." He fingered the buttons of her blouse. With a tug, one came opened. "I should leave." It came out as a statement but Sydney could tell from his tone that it was question.

"You should."

Sydney took the initiative at the door. She kissed him. Passionately. Endlessly. When she finally realeased his lips, they both breathed heavily, sucking in air while they waited for their pulses to still somewhat.

"Good night Rusty."

"I love you Syd." He left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rusty scanned the yellow pages until he found the address he was looking for. Ryan Harrison. Att. At law. 1325 PINEY FOREST RD.

"I'd like to see Harrison."

"Do you have an appointment?" the secretary asked.

"No but if you let him know that Russell Snyder is here, I think he'll see me."

After a brief conversation with her boss, the secretary told Rusty he could go in. When Rusty entered the office, Ryan was sitting behind his desk, seemingly absorbed in work.

"How can I help you?"

"This is not a professional visit. I'm here about Syd. Look, I can sympathize with you. If I was in your shoes, I might react the same way. But Syd has made her choice. And you're going to have to accept it. If you care about her, and I think you do, you wouldn't try to screw up our relationship."

"My relationship with Sydney is not open for discussion."

"That's where you're mistaken. You know longer have a relationship with her. At least not one that goes any further than friendship. And why she would even consider being your friend after the stunt you pulled on her last night is beyond me."

"I see Sydney told you about our evening together."

"Sydney and I are going to be married. We share everything."

"She told you about the kiss?" Ryan smiled wryily. "I guess she doesn't tell you everything after all."

"If you have something to say, say it."

"Everyone knows of Sydney's expertise in the boardroom. It's documented. Let's just say that last night I had the pleasure of discovering that her skills apply to the bedroom as well."

Rusty didn't remember getting up from the chair, going around the side of the desk, pulling Ryan up and his fist making contact with his face.

Ryan was standing, looking out the window when Sydney arrived. "What's going on?" Sydney asked. "You made it sound urgent-" she stopped, horrified. His eye was swollen and discolored. "What happened to you?" She moved closer, examining his eye. "Maybe you should sit down."

"What happened?"

"Your friend Russell paid me an unexpected visit and this," he touched his eye, "was the end result."

"I don't understand?"

"You know how hot-headed young people are."

"He hit you for no reason?"

"He had a reason, though unfounded. Jealousy. He's jealous of our friendship. I tried to expalin to him that we were friends. Just friends. But he insisted that I stay away from you. I said I wouldn't. I told him that if you wanted to end our friendship you would have to do it yourself. That's when he lost control and attacked me."

"This is my fault."

"No, no it isn't. But I do want you to know that if it wasn't for our friendship I would have

called the police. But I considered the negative press. Bringing your fiancé up on assault and battery charges right after the centerfold scandal would be disastrous for Lane Cosmetic and you."

"I don't know what I can say."

"You don't have to say anything."

"I have to go."

At Justins Sydney didn't bother waiting in the lobby for Rusty. She went directly to the kitchen. "We need to talk. Now."

Rusty wasn't surprised to see her. The instant after he'd hit Ryan he realized what he'd done. He played right into his hands.

"You know why I'm here."

"I was expecting you."

"Then you already have an answer for my question."

"He provoked me."

"What did he do?"

"It's nothing that he did. It's what he said."

"What did he say?"

"It's not important."

"It was important enough for you to attack him."

Rusty laughed halfheartedly. "Attack? I hit him. One time."

How many times doesn't matter. What matters is that you hit him without provocation. That's what matters."

"This is not the place to have this conversation. I'll come to your place after work."

Three hours later Rusty used the key Sydney had given him to let himself into her apartment. By the time she got home she would've had a chance to think about things. She should know him well enough to know that he didn't go around punching people for no good reason.

He was wrong. He tried to kiss Sydney when she walked in but she turned away from him.

"Still angry?"

"I've been thinking. I don't know if I want to get involved with a man who settles disagreements with his fists."

"I'm sorry to tell you this but you are way pass the getting involved stage. We are involved."

"Maybe I made the wrong decision. Maybe we shouldn't be involved."

"Why can't you accept that I was provoked?"

"Tell me."

"Trust me when I say I have my reasons for not telling you."

"Obviously trust is the problem."

"For you maybe but not for me. I trust you. I trust you enough not to question why you chose to keep the fact that Ryan kissed you last night from me."

"Is that why you hit him? Because he kissed me?"

"The idea of him kissing you, or any man kissing you bothers me. But no, that's not the reason I hit him."

"You're not going to tell me what happened."

"No more than to say I was provoked. Can you accept that?"

"I don't think I can. And I also don't know that I can be in a relationship with someone that I can't trust."

"You're really indebted to Ryan now aren't you."

"I'm sure that I don't suppose to have any idea what you're talking about."

"He gave you the perfect excuse, the perfect out. No one could blame you for ending a relationship with such a hot-headed young man as myself. A man who goes around beating up people for the hell of it." Rusty poured himself a drink. "But we both know the real reason why you're ending this relationship. You're scared to death of the thought of falling in love with me."

"You say that I'm afraid of my feelings. I say I'm not. And since we're both entitled to our own opinion, I would assume that this discussion as well as our

relationship is now at an end." There was nothing but a business inflection in her tone.

"If you think I'm going to chase after you, you're wrong."

"I don't expect nor do I want you to."

The keys to her apattment fell with a heavy thud to the table.

Sydney looked up to see the door closing. What had just happened. Ryan had asked her to come over to his office. Someone had hit him. That someone was Rusty. Rusty refused to expalin. And their relationship was over. Now that she'd went over everything that had happened, it all made perfectly good sense.

Rusty stood outside Sydney's apartment door, his hand on the doorknob. He'd just walked away from the woman he loved. And he didn't have the vaguest idea why.

Sydney's life fell back into its usual pre-Rusty routine. Work. An occasional lunch or dinner with Jennifer and Olivia. Work. Infrequent platonic dates with Ryan. But mostly work.

Sydney was dressed and waiting for Ryan. Before they left for dinner she needed to talk with him. Recently she'd gotten the impression that he wanted more than she was capable of giving.

"There something I need to make clear. Because Rusty and I are no longer together doesn't mean that I'm looking to get involved again."

"I'm willing to accept that. I only hope that when you are ready you'll consider me."

They ate at El Rodeo, a new Mexican restuarant. Since her breakup with Rusty Sydney hadn't been to Justins. Occasionally seeing him when he came in for his shoots was enough. She didn't want to see him outside of work.

"Maybe we should leave," Ryan suggested.

Sydney followed the direction of his eyes. It was Rusty. And he was with a woman. A woman whose name was preceded by all the right adjectives. Tall. Young. Blonde. Beautiful. All the adjectives that didn't precede her name.

"We shouldn't and we're not."

Sydney wasn't about to let Rusty and his date ruin her evening. Ostensibly they didn't. But if she was to be honest with herself she would have to admit that her evening was over the moment she saw him. Her food suddenly lost its taste. And her conversation with Ryan turned into a

monologue. Seeing him with another woman was revealing. He claimed to have been in love with her. Yet it had taken him all of twenty eight days to get over her.

"I know this isn't easy for you," Ryan offered. "If you like we could make him jealous."

"I don't think so. I've never been any good at playing games."

Sydney could hear the phone ringing as she unlocked her door.

"I need to speak to a Sydney St. James," the voice requested.

"Speaking."

"I'm calling from Lake Gaston Memorial Hospital. Your name was listed as the contact person for a Russell Francis Snyder. Mr. Snyder has been involved in an-"

Sydney dropped the receiver. She didn't remember rushing to her car and driving like a mad woman to the hospital.

"I'm here about Rusty."

The woman sitting behind the desk looked at Sydney. Obviously she wasn't the first lunatic the woman had

encountered today. "I'm sorry. I mean Russell Snyder."

"Are you Miss. St James?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Snyder is down the hall. The third room on the left. Number 119."

"Is he all right? What happened?" "The doctor will inform you."

That wasn't a good sign. If everything had been all right the woman would have told her.

Sydney opened the door to the third room on the left. Rusty was lying on the bed. He had a bandage around his head. His eyes were closed. "Rusty?"

He opened his eyes slowly. "There's only one of you, so I must be doing better."

"Where's the doctor?"

"Probably off somewhere taking care of a sick person." He was squinting.

"Don't you classify as a sick person."

"More in the category of a stupid person. I accidently dropped some cigarette ashes in my lap. I looked down to brush them away. When I looked up I was colliding with the rear end of a tractor trailer truck. And my head was making contact with my steering wheel."

"So what did the doctor say?"

"A lot. But it all boils down to a bump on the head."

"You could've seriously injured yourself. And when did you start smoking?"

"Twenty eight days ago." He closed his eyes. His head was throbbing. "I hope you don't mind that they called you. They wouldn't let me sign out unless I had an adult to accompany me."

That excluded his date. She hadn't looked a day over seventeen. And where was she? "I don't mind."

While he dressed and signed the release papers Sydney talked to the doctor. Rusty had a mild concussion. She should give him some aspirin for his head. Which should ache for about an hour or two. Aside from getting some rest, he wasn't under any restriction.

Rusty leaned back against the headrest closing his eyes. He wondered if it was his imagination or had Sydney taken the scenic route to his apartment. And was she going out of her way to hit every pothole in the street.

"Do you have any aspirins at your apartment?"

"I don't take aspirins."

"You are tonight." She stopped at the next store.

He already felt like an idiot now he was going to have to admit that aspirins upset his stomach. "I have a stomach problem."

"I'll get you aspirin free capsules. Unless you can't swallow capsules?"

The moment they got to his apartment Sydney suggested that he go lie down. When she went into the bedroom to check on him she found him in bed, the covers stopping at his waist. She would certainly make a wonderful Florence Nightingale. Instead of worrying about the health of her patient she was more concerned with the curly configuration of hair that ran down his chest and mysteriously disappeared beneath the covers.

"I'm not going to call you because I don't won't to wake you. But if you need me I'll leave my number here on the nightstand."

"I have a headache. Not amensia. And that's what it would take for me to forget your telephone number."

"I'll call tomorrow. To see how you're feeling," she added quickly.

He grabbed her hand before she left. "Thank you Syd."

He called her Syd. Why it should matter she didn't know. But she liked that he still called her that.

Sydney woke up as her usual time. She considered going into the office. She would probably be able to get a lot done. Seeing that it was Saturday the building would be virtually empty. An hour later the phone rang. She thought it was Rusty. It was Jennifer. She was coming over for breakfast.

Sydney was lying on the couch contemplating whether she should call Rusty or not when Jennifer arrived.

"Was I smart to bring breakfast or do you have
something in the refrigerator."

"You were smart."

"A bacon, egg and cheese biscuit or a steak biscuit. Which do you want?"

"Do you have a danish?"

"I would have thought that your eating habits would have improved after being involved with a chef."

"Aren't we subtle this morning."

"You want subtle. You look tired. If I was being my usual self I would've said you look like hell."

Sydney felt for puffiness under her eyes and then combed her fingers through her hair. She'd stayed up most of the night. She was afraid that if she went to sleep she would miss Rusty's telephone call. "Rusty was involved in an accident last night."

"Is he all right? Is he in the hospital?"

"He's fine and he's at home. Last night he had a mild concussion."

How is he this morning?"

"I don't know. I haven't spoken to him."

"Why not?"

"It's early and I didn't want to wake him."

"Were you together when the accident happened?"

Sydney shook her head.

"How did you fine out?"

Sydney told her about getting the telephone call. And about going to the hospital and taking him home.

Jennifer was grinning. "The only reason you rushed to the hospital was because of what?"

"I've already told you why. As a concerned employer. Nothing more."

"I just wanted to make sure I heard the lie correctly."

"Francis."

Jennifer looked at Sydney, puzzled.

"His middle name is Francis. Russell Francis Snyder. And he can't take aspirins."

"Can I give you a bit of unsolicited advice."

"Can I stop you?"

"I agree with Rusty. You used what happened between him and Ryan as an excuse. What woman in her right mind would give up a man like Rusty because he slugged her ex-boyfriend."

"Hitting Ryan wasn't the issue. It's trust or should I say the lack of it."

"Why couldn't you do as he asked. Trust that he had his reason for not telling you."

"Whose best friend are you?"

"Yours. That's why I'm saying this. You're scared senseless that you've fallen in love with a gorgeous twenty- five-year old who wears a gold stud in one ear, his hair in a ponytail and whose idea of getting dressed up is to wear a shirt instead of a t-shirt with his jeans."

Jennifer left and Sydney spent the rest of that morning and a great deal of the weekend trying not to think about what Jennifer had said. She phoned Rusty once. But no one picked up.

Monday morning didn't come soon enough for Sydney. Unlike most, who lived for the weekend, Sydney preferred the weekday. More specifically, the work day.

"What's this?" Sydney asked, as Debbie handed her a note. She read it: You did an excellent job, as usual,concerning the centerfold incident. To show my appreciation, a small party will be held tonight at eight at the Wilshire Hotel in your honor. Rosemary Lane.

Sydney looked up at Debbie. She was smiling. "I gather you already knew about this."

"The entire staff knows."

Being the guest of honor Sydney wanted to be on time. Ryan and her arrived at the hotel at seven-fifty. Everyone was already there. Everyone including Rosemary Lane. She took Sydney aside for a private moment. She again

complimented Sydney on her excellent handling of the centerfold incident. "A situation that could have easily been detrimental to the company, you turned around. I'm grateful."

Without looking for him, Sydney spotted Rusty. And the young blonde who was with him. Sydney turned away but not before realizing that they were headed in her direction.

"Congratulations Syd."

"Thank you." He was wearing the navy double breasted suit from wardrobe. "How's your head?" The bruise on his forehead was still visible.

"Hard as a rock," the blonde answered.

"This is my cousin Rana. She's visiting from Louisiana."

Of all the different relationships she imagined Rusty and this girl having, being cousins wasn't one of them.

ROBERTSON-102 "It's nice to meet you Rana. Have you ever giving any thought to becoming a model?"

Rana laughed. "No."

"You should."

"You're joking right?"

"Actually I'm Not. You have the kind of look Lane Cosmetics look for in young models. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

Rusty excused himself. He saw someone he wanted to talk to. "You're not trying to avoid me are you Ryan?"

"It all depends. Are you tempted to use my face for a punching bag again."

"The last time I did, look what good fortune it brought you. It got me out of Syd's life and you right back in it."

"From the looks of that blonde you're with, you don't seem to mind not being a part of Sydney's life."

Rusty laughed.

Ryan wanted to come in for a nightcap but Sydney

feigned tiredness. She had a new mystery she wanted to get started on. But once settled in bed with her book, she lost all interest. She was thinking about the evening. She'd had a nice time. But a realization hit her. She would've had an even better time if she shared it with the one person she truly cared for, Rusty.

Sydney expected getting over Rusty to be be hard. But what she hadn't expected was the degree of difficulty. Now that he'd been a part of her life, it was hard, extremely so, going back to the way things were.

She missed him.

Rusty went home and straight to bed. His head was pounding. He didn't know if it was from the accident or from seeing Sydney. For the past twenty eight days, she'd ruled his dreams, his desires, his thoughts during every waking moment. Sydney... Sydney... Sydney.

Rusty had come to a decision. If he had to chase after her, beg her, make a fool of himself, so be it. He wanted Sydney back in his life.

CHAPTER SIX

Rusty rang Sydney's doorbell at exactly five fifteen. He knew she's been up since five. And that she left for her office at five forty five. Which meant he had enough time to fix her breakfast.

"Good morning." He dropped a kiss on her surprised mouth and walked in.

"What are you doing here this early?" Then she thought about it. She wasn't expecting him. "Why are you here?"

"To fix you breakfast." He was already in the kitchen. "I know you don't usually have breakfast so I'll fix something light."

In her bedroom Sydney sat on the edge of the bed

putting on her nylons. She should be annoyed that he came over this early. But she wasn't. She was happy that Rusty was in her kitchen preparing her breakfast. She stopped herself from laughing aloud. If this was what courtship was all bout someone should've courted her a long time ago. She finished dressing.

"Coffee, two sugars. Orange juice, no pulp. Toast with orange marmalade."

"I'm impressed with your memory."

"You look good as usual."

"Is this all part of the courtship you told me about last night?"

"I'm giving you a preview of our marriage."

"So you're saying that you would get up this early, even though you didn't have to go to work until much later, and fix me breakfast?"

"I'm saying that who better than a chef to cook for his wife, regardless of the hour."

"You're making this sound to good to be true. And my policy is that when it sounds to good to be true it usually is."

"I'm not saying that I would cook everyday. On the weekends you could cook. You can cook can't you?"

"I'm not a chef but I haven't poison anyone that I know of."

"I can teach you. It'll be fun. You'd be surprised at what good cooks can do with butter and whip cream these days."

Sydney felt herself blushing.

"And not to make it sound so idyllic, though our marriage would be, as soon as you left I would go back to our bed, leaving the dirty dishes until later."

When it was time for Sydney to leave for her office Rusty was right behind her.

"I'm going to take you to work."

"Why?"

"Always suspicious aren't you? Two reasons. One, it's part of my courtship plan. And two, if I take you to work then I'll have to pick you up."

"And?"

"And if I pick you up I'll be in a better position to spend the evening with you."

***

He drove her to work. He put her hand on his thigh and covered it with his own. If he hadn't done so she would've removed her hand.

Sydney stared straight ahead. Maybe she was naive when it came to men. But if someone was to ask her, she would have to say that this, this being her hand on his thigh, was the most erotic experience she'd ever had.

There were only a handful of people in the building when they arrived. A security guard, some maintenance workers and a few young executives who had obviously came in early to impress their superiors.

"I'll stop by after my shoot." He leaned to kiss her but she turned away. "What?" He followed the dirction of her eyes. She was looking at the security guard. "So what if he sees us kissing. Everyone thinks we're engaged." He put his hands around her waist and pulled her to him. He lowered his head once again, this time he pressed his lipsagainst hers, flicking his tongue across her mouth. "I love you."

Sydney couldn't concentrate. She was thinking about insanity. She knew if she traced her family tree surely she would discover that insanity ran in the St James family. That would explain why the idea of getting married to Rusty was not totally ridiculous to her.

Sydney was in a meeting with Bill and Lily, her advertising department head and his assistant when her secretary interrupted.

"You should hear this," Debbie said, smiling. She put the radio she was holding on Sydney's desk and left.

Sydney looked at Bill then at Lily. From their expression they didn't know what was going on either.

The announcer on the radio knew though: "This next dedication is an oldie but a goodie. The Beatles 1964 hit 'YOU REALLY GOT A HOLD ONE ME'. This is for you Syd. With all my love, Rusty."

As the song played Bill and Lily tried unsuccessfully to hide their amusement. The model of decorum as usual, Sydney listened expressionlessly to the song. As on cue, the song went off and Rusty walked in. Bill and Lily excused themselves.

"Did you like the dedication?" Rusty sat in her chair pulling her down on his lap.

"Under any other circumstances yes but not while I'm in the middle of a meeting." It was hard for her to remain stern while he was nibbling at her earlobe. "And my office is not the appropriate place for this." She tried to wiggle free from his hold.

"One kiss and I'll let you go."

"This is--"

"Blackmail?"

"Blackmail." She brushed her lips across his, then opened her mouth eagerly as his tongue probed the delicate recesses.

"Reluctantly her let her go. "What about tonight? Your place or mine?"

"Neither. I'm going out with Ryan." Sydney was impressed. He waited for an explanation

before jumping to conclusions. "Ryan knows that our engagement is a farce."

"Was a farce," he corrected.

"That's why I'm going out with him. To tell him that."

"And somewhere in your conversation don't forgot to toss in the word monogamy."

"Monogamy?"

"You know, we see only each other."

"I know what the word means. I just hadn't applied it to our relationship."

"Start."

"We should get something straight. Just because we're seeing each other doesn't mean that I'm going to abandon my male friends."

"I'm not asking you to. But we both know that Ryan thinks of you as more than a friend. I just want it

understood that for him to hope for anything more is out of the question now."

"As I said before that's why I'm seeing him tonight. To tell him this."

"Maybe I should come with you?"

Sydney shook her head. "It would only make things worse. And besides, Ryan is a dear friend and I owe him this much."

Rusty kissed her before he left and told her to call after her dinner with Ryan.

When Ryan picked her up Sydney assumed they would go to a restaurant. She was surprised when they ended up at his apartment. He said his apartment would offer more privacy.

"I ordered chinese. I hope that's all right. I would've cooked but I didn't think I could compete with a chef."

Dinner was strained. Every time Sydney attempted to turn the conversation to Rusty and her, Ryan adeptly changed it. He knew why she'd invited him to dinner. He knew what she wanted to say.

"Rusty and I are together."

"I don't understand?" He was looking at her, daring her to answer.
"Neither did I at first. Then I realized that some things you can't explain. You simply have to accept."

"Listen to yourself. You're saying, you're telling me that you're involved in a relationship with a man and you don't know why." Ryan got up from the table and went into the living room.

Sydney followed. "That's not what I'm saying. I know why I'm with Rusty. I care about him."

"Why?"

"There are a lot of superfluous reasons." His great looks. His body. The way she felt when he touched her. His sense of humor. He thought it was great. She found it quirky yet endearing. "But there is one thing that sets him apart from any other man I've known. He doesn't try to compete with my work. He doesn't feel threatened by my success. He thinks it's great." She saw and read his expression. "And no, he's not an opportunist."

"He's twenty-five."

"I'm attracted to him not his age."

"Attraction. That's all it is. You're attracted to a younger man. There's nothing wrong with that. The mistake happens when you try to turn it into something more than what it is. An

infatuation. That's all it is."

"Everything you say may be true. But I need to find out for myself. And while I'm doing so I can't expect nor do I want you to wait in limbo."

"What if I say I don't mind waiting. That I'm positive this thing will pass."

"I'd say don't wait. I'd say that I'm inclined to believe that this thing will not pass."

After Ryan admitted to being in love with her, after he'd had his second scotch, Sydney suggested she call a cab for herself. But he asked her to stay...

Sydney's alarm clock and telephone sounded simultaneously. She switched off the clock and picked up the receiver. It was Rusty.

I'm downstairs and I'm coming up."

The dial tone hummed in Sydney's ear. She got out of bed, putting on her robe. Her doorbell sounded. He must've ran. He was angry. That was obvious from his tone. But why?

Sydney opened the door and he brushed passed her.

"Where were you last night?"

"I had dinner with Ryan. You already know that."

"I phoned you until one. How long did it take you to tell him to get lost?"

"Ryan is a friend. He deserved a little more than get loss."

Rusty knew he was sounding and acting like a jealous fool. Something that Sydney could use as further proof that he was too immature to be involved with her.

"How much more?"

"I don't like what you're implying."

"I'm not implying anything. You said you were going to call me. You didn't. Why?"

"I didn't get home until after one. I thought it was too late to call. If I'd known you'd be like this I would've called."

"You didn't get home until after one. What took you so long?"

"After dinner I told Ryan about us. As expected he didn't take the news well. He had a couple of drinks. I suggested that I leave. But he sort of asked me to stay a while longer."

"What do you mean sort of asked?"

"When I tried to leave he stood in front of the door. And he wouldn't move until I promised to stay a while longer."

"Did he hurt you?"

"I was the one who hurt him."

It took Sydney a while but she finally convinced Rusty not to go over to Ryan's.

Within seconds of being at her office, Sydney received an urgent telephone call from Rosemary Lane, owner of Lane Cosmetics. One of the company's models's was the featured centerfold in the current issue of Flesh, an adult magazine. An emergency board meeting was called.

"Unfortunately everyone knows and probably have seen why this meeting was called." Sydney gestured towards the magazine lying on the table. "One of our models has gotten herself into an unfortunate situation. What we have to decide is whether her ill-advised actions will effect Lane Cosmetics. The press haven't found out yet but it's only a matter of time before they do. And when that happens all hell is going to break loose. That's why we have to be prepared. First thing, I don't want anyone giving any statements to the press. An official statement will be

released after all the facts are known. Julie, the model in question, can help us determine what those facts are. She's waiting outside." Sydney motioned to Debbie.

"The first thing I'd like to do is apologize to you Miss. St. James," Julie, a striking young blonde said.

Sydney studied Julie as she spoke. She was wringing her hands. Obviously she was nervous. And rightly so.

"It would be a relief if I could tell you that the girl in those pictures wasn't me. But it is me. And it would further help my case if I could tell you that I was drugged. I wasn't under the influence of alcohol nor drugs."

"Why did you allow those pictures to be taken?"

"For the money. But I can tell you this much. I

didn't pose nude. I had on underwear. Admittedly skimpy but underwear nevertheless."

Sydney continued with her questions. "If we're to believe this, how do you account for your lack of clothing in the pictures?"

"The photographer must've doctored the pictures. And even if he did, I know that that doesn't excuse me."

"Did you sign a release form?"

Julie nodded.

"I haven't spoken to our lawyers yet but legally I don't think we have any recourse."

"Are you saying that I'm fired?"

"I'm saying that I want you to go home. I don't want you to discuss this with anyone. Particularly the press. I'll be in contact with you in two, three days at the most. By then I'll have a decision concerning your employment at Lane Cosmetic."

The next three days were even more hectic than Sydney imagined. As she knew would happen, the press found out. And as expected, they converged at her office.

She listened to input from the board mermbers. The majority of them wanted to fire Julie. The concensus being that it would be better if she wasn't associated with the company or its products any longer. They were also

concerned that the consumers would automatically associate Lane Cosmetic with the centerfold. But the final decision was Sydney's.

After three days of reviewing all the facts, Sydney called a press conference. She had made a decision about Julie.

"Julie Winstead will continue on as one of Lane

Cosmetic lead spokesmodel. We at Lane Cosmetic make an effort to treat all of our employees as family members. And if your family can not forgive you for making a mistake, who will. We can only hope that what has happened to Julie will serve as a warning to other young, innocent girls in the modeling profession."

Ryan was waiting for Sydney in her office after the press conference.

"I caught your press conference. You were brilliant as usual."

For the first time since the incident with the pictures began, Sydney was able to breath a sigh of relief.

"I think you giving this young girl a second chance was a smart move. It lets the public know that Lane

Cosmetic isn't one of those big impersonal companies. It makes the public think that you care about your employees."

"I'm surprised to see you. And I do care about my employees."

"We're still friends aren't we?"

"I hope so."

"That's why I'm here. As your friend. I know that the situation here at work has kept you extremely busy. So I guess you haven't had much time to spend with Rusty?"

"He understands."

"I may know the reason why."

"Ryan you've known me long enough to know that I don't like to play games. If there's something you want to tell me. Tell me."

"I have a feeling that while you've been working Rusty has been seeing someone else."

"Is this just a feeling or do you have some facts."

"The other day I saw him with a woman. They were coming out of some shop. They were laughing and obviously enjoying each other. When they got into his car, he leaned over and kissed her."

"I appreciate you telling me."

"I hate having to be the one to tell you. But as your friend I thought it was my duty. And I simply can't stand the thought of him making a fool of you."

"Again, I appreciate you telling me."

"I'll call you. Maybe we can have lunch or dinner?"

"That'll be fine."

Sydney surprised herself. After Ryan left she told Debbie to contact Rusty. He would either be at Justins or at home. When she located him, tell him that she would be at his apartment at seven.

At seven Sydney rang Rusty's doorbell.

When he tried to kiss her she turned away. "I thought since the situation at work was resolved you'd be in a relaxed mood?"

"Are you seeing someone else?"

"From the way you're acting you've already decided that I am. So why bother asking me."

"Is that a yes?"

"You're unbelievable. You're willing to give one of your employees the benefit of the doubt but not me. I'm guilty as charged. No questions asked."

"I'm not involved in a personal relationship with Julie. And I did ask you a question. Are you seeing someone else?"

"You're not asking you're accusing. And I want to know who you've been talking to."

"That's irrelevant. What's relevant is whether it's true or not?"

"What kind of man do you think I am. That I could ask you to marry me then the moment your back is turned go out with someone else?"

"You still haven't answered my question. Or should I take your reluctance as an answer?"

"I'm not seeing anyone else. And you can tell your friend Ryan to go to-"

"I didn't mention anything about Ryan."

"You didn't have to. What did he tell you? I have a right to know."

Sydney told him.

"The woman he saw me with was Jennifer. And we were coming out of an art supply shop. I know how hard it's been for you at work and I wanted to get you something. I didn't know what. That's why I phoned Jennifer. When she found out that I dabbled at painting she suggested I give you a picture. That's what we were doing at the shop. Buying a frame. And yes I kissed her. On the cheek. For helping me out." He left the room for a moment and returned with a painting. "I hope you like it."

It was a painting of a sunset. Looking at it, Sydney felt as if she was a part of it. As if she was standing at a window looking out as it happened. "I do like it."

"Now that you have your painting, maybe you should leave."

"You have every right to be annoyed with me. But I don't think I should leave. At least not until we talk about this. The last time we had a disagreement it took three weeks to get it resolved. I'm not going through that again."

Instead of sitting with her on the couch he took the chair across from her. "You actually thought I was seeing someone else." It wasn't a question.

"You remember saying that you've never been seriously involved with anyone before?"

"Actually what I said was that I'd never been in love before," he corrected.

"Well, I'm in the same position. I'm thirty-one years old and I've never really been jealous over a man before.

That is until you. And until today. When I thought that you might be seeing someone else I didn't know what to do. And believe me, I'm not accustomed to not knowing what to do."

Rusty joined her on the couch. "Jealous huh?"

"Don't let it go to your head."

"You know what happens next don't you?" He was kissing her neck.

"Next?"

"Couples fight then they make up. We've covered the former now it's time for the latter." His arms went around her, pushing her back unto the couch. His hands were every- where at once on her body. Touching. Caressing. His lips on her lips. On her throat. Causing her to be dizzy,

falling, spinning out of control.

Sydney pushed against his chest, needing to be free. "Ryan will be surprised to learn that it was Jennifer."

Rusty sat up, releasing Sydney. "The man is jealous. And he wants you gore himself. And he'll do anything to make that happen. Including lying." He needed to have a talk with Ryan. Tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rusty surveyed himself in the mirror. He was wearing his good luck outfit. Black Levis. Black suede cowboy boots and a white oxford shirt. For what he had in mind, he needed all the luck he could get.

"Good morning Debbie. Is she in?" Rusty was eager, pathetically so, to see Sydney.

"I'll let her know that you're here."

"In a minute. I need to talk to you. Actually I need a favor."

"Anything."

"Does she have a full schedule today?"

Debbie checked the calendar. "About the same as usual."

"Is there any way you can reschedule her appointments?"

"Which ones? The morning or afternoon appointments?"

"Both."

Debbie said that she'd somehow manage to work things out. He kissed her on the cheek and went it.

"Let's go."

"I beg your pardon," Sydney said, puzzled.

"Let's go. We're wasting time."

"I couldn't agree more. You're wasting my time. So if you don't have a specific reason for being here, I have to get back to work."

"You know what they say about all work and no play..."

"I'll tell you what I say about the proverbial they. They were probably unemployed."

"Let's go Syd."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Yes you are."

"I'm a mature woman not to mention a busy one, and I refuse to get into one of those stupid I-will-not-you-will- to-arguments."

Rusty knew that Sydney wasn't the type of woman to take orders. But he had a plan of action, and no one, including Sydney was going to deter him from carrying it through.

"You can walk out or I'll carry you out. The choice is yours."

"You wouldn't dare." She felt safe behind her desk. Big mistake.

He was around her desk, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder.

"Put me down."

"Are you coming with me?"

There was a brief moment of hesitation then she answered. "Yes. Now put me down. I have you know that I'm not impressed with your caveman tactics."

"You forgetting your pocketbook."

She cut him a slicing look.

Sydney stooped to tell Debbie to reschedule her morning appointments. "You won't be back for your afternoon appointments either," Debbie added, smiling. "But you don't have to worry. I've taken care of everything."

Rusty tried to engage Sydney in friendly conversation as he drove but she was having no parts of it. She stared out the window until her curiosity got the better of her.

"Would you mind telling me where we're going, please." She'd decided to change her tactic. The silent treatment wasn't working. Rusty seemed perfectly content to carry on a running monologue. And being angry with him was just as ineffective.

Rusty glanced at her warily. "You'll find out in about ten minutes. Before we get to where we're going, we have to agree on some ground rules for today. No mentioning of your friend Ryan or of work. Agreed?"

"Only if you tell me where we're going."

"We're here."

Sydney looked around. They were in a parking lot. "I don't understand?"

"We're going to see a movie."

"I don't believe it. This whole cloak-and-dagger routine just to see a movie."

Inside, Sydney noticed that they were one of two couples there. "You want to know why there are only four of us in here. All the other mature, responsible adults are at work this time of day." She glanced at the couple sitting across from them. "Even they have a plausible excuse. They're teenagers."

"What, are you commenting on my work habit?"

"You're irresponsible."

"You're here with me. What does that make you?"

"A kidnapped victim."

Sydney found the movie bearable. The plot was about the relationship between an older woman and a younger man. She didn't have to wonder if it was a coincidence or not that Rusty had selected this particular movie.

When the movie was over Sydney checked her watch. If she went back to her office now she could get two ot three solid hours of work in before lunch.

"I don't know why you're bothering to check the time. I told you that today is for fun. You're not going back to your office."

What other fun do you have planned?" she asked sarcastically.

"What, you didn't enjoy the movie?"

"It was obvious."

"I'd forgotten. You like the type of movie where you need a degree in a foreign language to understand it. But must I remind you again that today is suppose to be about fun. You do know what the word means don't you? And what

was so obvious about the movie?"

"The plot, the characters, the ending, need I say more?"

"A man and a woman fall in love and have a happy life together. What is so unrealistic about that?"

"I didn't say unrealistic I said obvious. But I am puzzled. If we were still together, it would've made some sense for you to drag me to see this particular movie but seeing that we are no longer together it doesn't make sense."

"Now I remember one of the reasons why I broke up with you. You are so annoying. You have to analyze things to death. Just for once take things at face value. I wanted to take you to a movie. End of story."

"Just for the record I broke up with you."

Rusty laughed. He'd even missed them arguing. "Ready for some shopping?"

Rusty was trying to woo her back. First a love story now he was going to take her shopping. If she was the type she'd pick out something outrageously expensive. And who knows, she just might.

Sydney was surprised but she covered when they wound up in a men's store.

"Seeing how you have such excellent taste, I thought you might help me choose some clothes."

"We're shopping for you?"

"When I had to borrow a suit from wardrobe for your party I realized that I need more than boots, jeans and t-shirts."

This was a first for Sydney, helping a man select his clothing. If someone was to ask her she'd deny it, but waiting outside the dressing room while Rusty tried on everything from suits to jean, she was enjoying herself. She was having fun.

"What do you think?"

He had on a pair of white pleated trousers. A pink shirt, opened three buttons down and a blazer whose color Sydney couldn't determine. Sydney shook her head. "You look like a Don Johnson reject."

"I take it you don't like it."

"Right."

After the shopping spree they went to the country club.

"I didn't know you were a member?" she asked him.

"I'm not. I can't afford the annual dues. But I know that you are a member. And I also know that you enjoy tennis."

Rusty knew that tennis was Sydney's game but he

didn't have any idea how good she was until she beat him two games so quickly that he didn't even realize what had happened. He walked to the net. "Look Syd, take it easy will you. We're not playing Wimbledon. You're not going to get a trophy. Or get to kiss some member of the roya
family. This is suppose to be fun. How many times must I tell you this. F-U-N."

"I am having fun. And have you caught your breath yet?"

This was one of the disadvantages of being involved with an intelligent woman. You could never pull anything over on her. "Up until now I've been trying to be a gentleman. I didn't want to embarrass you. After all, this is your club and I'm only a guest. I didn't want you to lose face."

Sydney noticed that they had attracted a small group of onlookers. Three females. Obviously they were impressed with his form in his tennis whites.

"If you insist I'll play up to my ability."

"Please do."

The next two games went as the previous ones. She beat him. She showed him no mercy.

"Before you say anything I want you to know that I allowed you to win."

"That would explain everything. Like why you were running all over the court, sweating profusely and still not able to return the ball. And when you did manage to return it, it was long. Way long."

"I'm still recuperating from my accident."

Sydney didn't know what but she knew something was wrong. For no apparent reason Rusty whole attitude had changed the instant they got to his place. He suddenly became quiet and if she wasn't mistaken he appeared nervous, anxious even.

"Are you about finished eating?"

She noticed that Rusty was looking at her oddly. "Why? Do you have something planned for me?"

"You could say that."

Sydney ate the rest of her shrimp fried rice. She noticed that Rusty had hardly touched his moo goo gai pan which was his favorite chinese dish. "I wasn't going to say anything but obviously you're not going to tell me. So I'm asking. What's wrong?"

Without saying a word Rusty pushed his chair back from the table and got up. He walked around to Sydney, turning her to face him. He went down on his knee, taking her hand in his. "Will you be my wife?"

"Yes." The word just came out.

"Yes?" He was stunned. He was shocked. He was hardly breathing.

"Yes, she breathed and as she parted her lips, he leaned forward and tasted her. Neither was prepared for the sudden flood of heat and passion that seared through them. They went down on the kitchen floor in a tangle. Rusty cushioning her with exquisite care as she lay on top of him. They never broke their kiss. They couldn't. Their kiss was making up for the past twenty eight miserable days they'd spent apart.

"Rusty," she gasped finally. "We should stop."

Reluctantly he released her, allowing her to move off him.

In the living room they sat on the couch. Again without warning, he picked her up, sitting her on his lap.

"Rusty, I need to say something..."

Rusty heard the catch in her voice and his heart skipped a beat. Please don't say that you were only joking, that you don't want to marry me."

"I-"

"You're a smart woman. You have to know that you don't joke around with a man about something as important as being his wife."

"I-"

"And you can't take it-" Sydney put her hand over his mouth.

"Shut up. What I want to say is that I love you."

"You love me?"

"I'm in love with you."

His arms went around her, holding her close, nuzzling her neck. "Let's not wait. Let's do it now." His hand was moving slowly up and down her back.

The way she was feeling she didn't think she could refuse him. She didn't want to. She wanted to make love with him now. Right now. "I want you so much Rusty," she said, her mouth pressing into his neck, her hands undoing the buttons of his shirt.

He went still.

She stopped kissing him and lifted his chin so that their eyes met. "Isn't this what you want?"

She kissed the corner of his mouth.

"You know it is." He moved against her, allowing her to feel what she did to him.

"What is it then?"

"I want to marry you. Then I want to make love to you."

Sydney flushed. He wanted to wait until they were married. "I feel like such a fool." She tried to but he wouldn't let her pull away from him.

"There's no reason why you should. Darling, I want you just as much as you want me."

"How short of an engagement do you want?" Sydney removed herself from his lap. If they were going to talk and only talk she needed not to be sitting on his lap.

"Is sixty minutes long enough?"

Sydney didn't answer.

"Let's get married today."

Sixty minutes later after Sydney pulled some strings, they had their blood test and marriage license and was on their way to the justice of the peace.

There was one couple ahead of them. A young couple. They looked about eighteen. At least they had an excuse for doing this. Youth. What is yours, Sydney asked herself.

"You haven't changed your mind have you?" Rusty saw the way Sydney was looking. Comatosed was the adjective that came to mind.

Sydney shook her head. "Have you?"

He shook his head.

"Do you want the regular or deluxe ceremony?" the justice of the peace asked.

"What's the deluxe?" Sydney asked.

"For ten dollars more my wife will play a selection on the piano."

"We're only going to get married once, why not go all out. We'll take the deluxe ceremony. That is if my wife has an extra ten dollars. I spent all my money shopping."

Sydney gave him the ten dollars. She couldn't quite figure out who was crazy or more crazier, Rusty or herself.

"Does your wife know "Suspicious Minds" by Elvis Presley?"

Sydney now had the answer to her question. Rusty was definitely the crazier of the two of them. What man in his right mind would request "Suspicious Minds" for his wedding song?"

"Wilt thou Russell Francis Snyder..."

When Sydney started to go into the apartment Rusty yelled, "Wait."

"What?"

"You are new at this aren't you? We just got married. I'm suppose to carry you over the threshold." He scooped her up and carried her into the apartment.

Inside, he just stood there in the middle of the room holding her. "I don't think you'd break any hundred year old tradition if you put me down now."

"If you're hungry I could fix something." He started towards the kitchen.

"No. It seems like we just had lunch."

"How about a nap then?"

"A nap?" Sydney checked her watch. "It's only six." She saw his disappointment. She took his hand and they

went into the bedroom.

For a long moment they sat on the bed and did nothing more than look at each other, intensely, studying each others faces. Sydney placed both hands on his cheeks and felt herself being magnetically drawn towards him. Gently, she bit him, searching the inside of his mouth with her tongue. They kissed long, they kissed deep until they finally came up gasping for air.

"I'll be right back," she said.

"I'll be waiting."

Inside the bathroom Sydney changed into a robe. But before doing so she stared at herself critically in the mirror. What would he see when he looked at her. What would she feel like to him.

Sydney pressed her hands down on the sink, staring at her reflection. She was married. She was someone's wife. She had a husband. Sydney St. James Snyder. Sydney Snyder. Syd Snyder. Mrs. Russell Francis Snyder. "Hi I'm Sydney and this drop dead gorgeous twenty-five-year old man is my husband." Unbelievable.

When Sydney came out the bathroom Rusty was waiting for her. He'd taken off all his clothes except for his boxers. She joined him on the bed. She brushed a strand of hair from his face. "You are so beautiful."

"That's my line isn't it?"

"Nothing about our relationship has ever been conventional. So why start now." They began to kiss, her body already burning for him.

Rusty pulled back momentarily. "Sydney," he said. "Close your eyes." He slipped a wedding ring on her finger. "I love you."

Tonight Rusty would leave no stone unturned. There would be no part of Sydney that he wouldn't know intimately. He nibbled at her lips, first the upper then the lower and then slowly moved to her throat.

Gently Rusty slipped his hands into the fold of her robe and sought her breast. He felt her sharp intake of breath as he circled it, then cupped it in the curve of his hand and gently caressed it. "May I open this?" He slowly loosened the sash and pushed the robe apart until her bare skin was lit by the the soft rays emitting from the lamp.

Rusty dipped his head and took her into his mouth.

Sydney's heartbeat was irregular. She locked her fingers in his hair, holding him captive. Her shouted words of passion were unintelligible as bolts of pleasure pulsed throughout her body.

Rusty slid his body completely over hers, entering her slowly, his eyes focusing on her face. The feelings she was feeling were reflected in her features, the feelings that were identical to his. Joy. Passion. Love.

Hours later when they woke, they were still wrapped in each others arms. "I think I'm going to like taking naps with my wife." They made love again. And several more times before sleep finally overtook them.

Sydney's hand touched the space beside her. The sheet was cold. Abandoned. Unoccupied. Where was he?"

Sydney stood silently watching as he cooked breakfast. The gorgeous man in her kitchen wearing only a pair of faded Levis was her husband. The same husband who had made love to her over and over the night before, the same husband whose lovemaking made her feel as if her

body would explode. "My husband." She'd spoken the words aloud without realizing it.

Rusty turned around. "Good morning. I hope you're hungry. I fixed all of your favorites."

Insatiable was never a word that Sydney would apply to herself. At least not until now. "For food, no. But for my husband, I'm ravenous."

They didn't, rather couldn't, make it to the bedroom. They made love on the living room couch with as much intensity and desire as the previous night.

I'm hungry for food," Sydney said into his chest as they lay entwined on the couch.

The food Rusty had fixed before they made love was ruined. So he had to cook breakfast again. Though this time it turned into a laborious project. In between preparing the eggs and dicing the other ingredients for the omlet they stopped to kiss. Which quickly turned into some serious necking.

"How do you expect me to cook when you keep looking at me like that." He was a professional but you couldn't tell from the way he multilated the green pepper.

"Like what?" she asked innocently.

"You know like what."

That she could make him nervous just by looking at him, she loved the feeling.

"I was thinking that we should hold off telling anyone that we're married."

"Why? Are you ashamed of me?"

"I can't speak for your aunt and uncle but I know that my parents are going to be furious when they find out that their only daughter is maried and they weren't there for the blessed event.

Rusty leaned over and stuffed a piece of toast in her mouth. "I have a plan."

"I hope it's better than your previous plan. If I remember correctly you didn't have enough money to pay for our wedding ceremony."

"You take some time off from work." She frowned. "You deserve it. And I know I can get off at the restaurant. We go to North Carolina to visit your parents. We tell them that we're engaged and that it's going to be a short engagement. We can get remarried at your parent's house. That'll make your mother happy."

"What about-"

"After we visit your parents we can go to Louisiana to visit my aunt and uncle. My aunt can help your mother with the wedding. And this time we can get a professional to preform the music. That justice of the peace's wife didn't do "The King" justice."

Sydney could only imagine her mother's horror when she learned that Rusty wanted the wedding music to include a rendition of Elvis Presley's "Suspicious Minds"."

"I'm going to tell Jennifer and Olivia."

"Fine. And now that we've settled all our problems. What shall we do for the rest of the day? Read? Play scrabble? Go visit friends? Any ideas Mrs. Snyder?" Rusty pulled Sydney up from the chair and led her to the bedroom.

"I have one or two suggestions that may interest you Mr. Snyder."

The newlywed spent the next forty eight hours in Sydney's apartment. They didn't go out and no one came in.

CHAPTER NINE

Rusty was on his way out when the doorbell sounded. It was Jennifer and Olivia.

"Hi and bye," Rusty said, smiling. "Syd is in the shower. She'll be out in a second."

Jennifer and Olivia looked at each other then took a seat. "Was it me or did Rusty seem unusually happy. Too happy for a man who has broken up with his girlfriend. And what is he doing here?"

"Why don't we just wait and ask Sydney," Olivia suggested.

"Ask me what," Sydney said.

"What your ex-boyfriend is doing here. And why was he looking happy?" Jennifer asked.

Sydney joined Jennifer on the sofa. "He's not my ex-boyfriend any longer."

"You're back together?"

"You could say that."

"That's wonderful."

Sydney noticed that Jennifer had very little to say. Which was unusual to say the least. "What about you Jen? You don't think it's wonderful?"

"What I'm thinking is where have you been? I've been calling for the past two days. All I got was your answering machine."

"I tried to call you too," Olivia added. "I even called your office. Either Debbie didn't know or wouldn't say where you were."

"How long have Rusty and you been back together?"

"About two days."

"So that would... I'm impressed. Two whole days." Jennifer stood up. "I bow to you. Oh great goddess of endurance."

Olivia was looking from Jennifer to Sydney. "I don't get it?"

"You don't have to," Jennifer offered. "Sydney got enough for you, me and the rest of Lake Gaston."

"You mean Sydney and Rusty... For two days? Nonstop?" Olivia was blushing.

"That's what I mean." Jennifer was smiling.

"Before you two let your imaginations get the best of you I should tell you that we did more than that."

"I'm not greedy. That would've been enough for me," Jennifer said.

"We also got married." She flashed her wedding ring. Sydney wished she had a camera. This was definitely a Kodak moment.

"Married," they said simultaneously.

"You know man and wife."

"I'm stunned."

"I didn't know you had it in you," Jennifer said, reaching to hug Sydney. Tell us everything. And don't leave out the good parts. Like what he looks like naked with water streaming down that gorgeous body."

"Jennifer! He happens to be her husband."

"That's why I asked her. Who better to know than his wife."

Sydney told them everything. Well almost everything. She told them how Rusty came to her

office and got her. About the movie. About their shopping spree. About him proposing to her in the kitchen while she ate shrimp fried rice. About them getting married by a justice of the peace. She left out the specifics about their wedding night much to the dismay of Jennifer. Though with her writer's imagination she knew that Jennifer would come up with her own scenario. But as vivid as Jennifer's imagination was, she doubted if she or anyone could began to imagine the idyllicness of her wedding night and the two days that followed.

Sydney had to go into her office to make arrangements for taking some time off.

"Good morning Ms. St. James," Debbie said. "You look especially well this morning."

"I feel especially well."

Sydney was clearing her calendar and delegating assignments to her executives when Debbie buzzed her. "You have a call on line three."

"Hello?"

"I miss you."

"I know what you mean." It had only been a matter of hours since they'd seen each other, since they'd made love in the shower.

"Is everything all right Sydney?" her vice president asked. "You look a bit flushed."

"I'm fine."

"You can say that again," Rusty said.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"I know. Am I confusing you darling?"

"Is that the reason for this call?"

"I was able to get the time off from the restaurant. I called to see if you were able to clear your calendar."

"That's what I'm in the process of doing now."

"I'll let you go then."

"I'll talk to you later."

"I love you."

"Me too."

"You to what?"

"I believe you know what."

"Say it."

"Did I mention that I'm in the middle of a meeting?"

"Say you love me."

"I'd be more than happy to expound on that particular subject at a later time."

"Say you love me and I'll hang up."

Sydney looked up. As expected all eyes were on her. "I love you." She placed the receiver down and continued working as best she could.

Rusty was waiting for her when she got home.

"Did you get everything taken care of?"

"Yes."

"What took you so long?"

"Don't tell me you're one of those husbands who expect his wife to be accountable for every minute of her whereabouts."

"We're newlyweds. We're suppose to want to spend every minute together. I do. Don't you?"

Sydney smiled. "Of course I do." She tried to kiss him but he pulled away from her.

"You're just saying that. You rather work than be with me."

Sydney tried not to but she began to laugh. "I'm not just saying that. I thought about you all the time I was at the office." She removed the clasp from his hair,

combing her fingers through it. "And I would've rushed straight home to you but I had to stop by the jewelers." She reached into her bag. "To get this." She opened a small box and took out a gold wedding band. She kissed the third finger on his left hand then slid the band on his finger. "I love you."

"The following morning Sydney and Rusty were up and ready for their trip to North Carolina. They stopped by his apartment to pick up Rana. When Sydney found out that her brother Grant was going to be home she suggested that Rana come along. She had a feeling that they would hit it off.

It was only a two hour drive from lake Gaston to Eden North Carolina so Sydney drove. She was surprised that Rusty didn't put up an argument about her driving. Most men, at least all the ones she knew, was so proprietary when it came to driving. But not Rusty. It just further proved to her that marrying Rusty was a smart, if not the smartest, decision she'd made in a long time.

After the first hour Sydney had to turn on the radio for company. Rusty and Rana were asleep. She didn't know why Rana was tired but she knew Rusty's excuse. They had gone to bed right after dinner but they hadn't gotten any sleep. She'd waken feeling rejuvenated. Rusty, she had to drag him out of bed.

Rusty woke just as Sydney pulled into the driveway of a large two story Georgian-era brick home. Sydney's parents were standing in the doorway.

Sydney hugged and kissed her parents.

"Nice to see you again Mr. and Mrs. St. James."

"What's this Mr. and Mrs. nonsense. Call us Stephanie and Bill." Bill extended his hand. Stephanie hugged him.

"This is my cousin Rana."

Sydney was unpacking when Rusty came in. He plopped down on her bed.

"What's wrong darling?"

"I don't think I can stand this."

"I thought you liked my parents?"

"I do. What I don't like is you sleeping in one room and me three doors down. I know there has to be some

unwritten law about newlyweds not sleeping apart."

"Give me a kiss." She sat astride him on the bed.

"No."

"Please."

"You don't care that we're going to have to go five whole days without each other."

Sydney pushed him back on the bed and kissed him.

Rana was out at the pool working on her tan when someone stepped in from of her, blocking

the sun.

"You're standing in my way." She opened her eyes. He was about an inch shorter than her five ten height. His hair was dark and preppy cut. And he had the build of a distance runner. Not her type. She closed her eyes.

"Too much sun isn't good for you."

"I'll risk it."

He didn't say anything else but Rana knew he hadn't left.

"Who are you?"

"Rana Snyder."

"Snyder? Are you related to my sister's fiancé?"

"Cousin."

There was another moment of silence.

Rana opened her eyes. "What are you staring at?"

"I suspect that when a woman parades around in practically nothing she should be accustomed to being stared at."

Without saying a word Rana got up from the lounger, looked him straight in the eyes and said, "And I would suspect that someone who goes around ogling strangers would be accustomed to this." She pushed him into the pool.

Rusty and Sydney jumped up from the bed and rushed to the window when they heard a yell.

"The young man getting out of the pool is my brother Grant."

"I see he has already met Rana. You were right. They seem to be hitting it off."

Rusty volunteered to fix dinner.

"Dinner is delicious Rusty," Stephanie complimented. "What kind of sauce is on the salmon?"

"A dill sauce."

"I know that chefs are particular about their recipes.But seeing that I'm practically your mother-in-law you can share it with me, can't you."

"Three tablespoons of cognac, that's the secret."

Sydney was watching Rana and Grant. After the incident at the pool she was surprised that they were able to sit at the same table with each other and be civil. Although she had noticed that they hadn't spoken to each other.

"You've probably been asked this a thousand times before but are you a model?" The question came from Bill St. James.

"Hopefully. Sydney has offered me a modeling job when school is out."

"I thought all colleges had let out for the summer?"

"I'm a high school senior."

This announcement caused Grant to nearly choke.

"Are you all right son?"

"I'm fine."

He wasn't fine. Sydney knew it. He had that look. The same one she had when she discovered how old Rusty was. Now things were beginning to make sense. Grant's unusual behavior. He was attracted to Rana. But what red blooded male wouldn't be. Only thing was, her brother was twenty- two years old, five years older than Rana. And knowing Grant the way she did he must be mortified to be attracted to someone he considered a kid.

About an hour after everyone had turned in Sydney's heard a light knocking on her door. She was expecting it.

"I come to say good night." Rusty walked in, closing the door behind him.

"My family is crazy about you."

"What about you? Are you crazy about me?" His hands were around her waist, pulling her to him.

"Me, I'm just crazy. I had to be to think that we could stay under the same roof and not make love."

Rusty was nuzzling her neck but he stopped. "And you don't think we can?"

"You tell me."

Rusty tilted her chin up and brushed his lips lightly across hers. "Good night Mrs. Snyder."

The next morning Rusty was awaken early. Too early. Bill and Grant had made plans to take him to the club. They were going to teach him to play golf.

For a novice Rusty did surprisingly well. So much so that Bill St. James couldn't resist bragging to his golfing buddies about his soon to be son-in-law. But Rusty did have to be reminded that the object of the game of golf wasn't to see who could hit the ball the farthest.

After their round they went inside the club for a drink. "I'm pleased that you're going to be a part of the St. James family," Bill said to Rusty. "This is the first time in a long time that I can ever recall seeing Sydney this happy. And it's all thanks to you."

"That goes for me too," Grant added.

"I love Syd. I don't know what else I can say."

"I think that about says it all." Bill St. James offered Rusty his hand.

The moment his father left the table Grant changed the subject to Rana. Rusty wasn't surprised. It had been apparent last night at dinner that Grant was interested in his cousin.

"You and your cousin seem close?"

"We are. When my parents died my aunt and uncle, Rana's parents, took me in and raised me. So in every way that counts, Rana is more like a kid sister than a cousin to me."

"As a big brother I imagine you have to keep a lot of guys at bay?"

"There are a lot of guys always hanging around her but I don't think there's anyone special."

"What kind of guys do she usually date?" Probably jocks or the silent brooding type that girls seem to fall all over themselves to be with. Unfortunately for him, he didn't fall into either category. The brainy type, which he'd been classified as, appealed to the parents of the girls not the girls themselves.

"I can't say that she has a type. But if you're curious, we're leaving in a day or two to visit my aunt and uncle in Black Bottom. If you want, come visit."

The night before they were to leave Rusty fixed another splendid dinner. And afterwards when it was dusk everyone gathered outside on the deck. Rusty turned on some music. He chose a slow number and everyone danced. Bill and Stephanie. Grant and Rana. Rusty and Sydney. "It seems like forever since I've held my wife in my arms," Rusty whispered, nippling at Sydney's ear.

When Rusty first told her that he held from Black Bottom Louisiana, Sydney immediately had an image of what it would look like. Her image was wrong. Black Bottom was a small picturesque town. The kind you see and marveled over in the movie. The kind you see on

postcards and wish you were there.

Rusty's aunt and uncle's home was deceiving. Small in overall size and rustic in appearance, the interior of the house turned out to be quite modern.

"Welcome to our home," Ben Snyder said to Sydney, apparently pleased with his nephew's choice.

"And to our family," Sara Snyder added, reaching for and hugging her.

"I'm happy to be here."

Sydney didn't if it was intentional or not but immediately after dinner everyone, Rusty, Ben and Rana suddenly had something they'd forgotten to do, leaving her alone with Sara.

"They weren't very subtle ," Sara said, smiling. "I guess this is when I'm suppose to ask questions and get to know you. But I already feel that I do. Rusty's phoned and written us, telling us all about you. When he first wrote and told us that he'd found the woman he wanted to marry, Ben and I were a little concerned. We thought he'd went to the big city and gotten in over his head."

"I don't understand?"

"Women like you don't usually end up with men like Rusty. And when it does happen, it's usually only

temporary."

"A friend of mine had similar concerns." Ryan. "I can only tell you what I told my friend. I love Rusty."

Sara smiled.

Sydney couldn't sleep. She was in Rusty's old room lying in his bed while he was on the couch in the living room. This was definitely not the ideal sleeping

arrangement for newlyweds. She got up, pulling on her robe. Maybe a cup of tea would help her relax. On her way to the kitchen, she made a detour to the living room. Rusty was asleep. She leaned down to kiss him and suddenly felt herself being pulled down.

She was lying on top of him. "We can't do this."

"Why not? We're married."

"Your aunt and uncle don't know this."

Reluctantly he released her. And she adjusted her robe, retying the sash.

"Well they do know that we're engaged. So cuddling wouldn't cause a scandal." He slid closer beside her, nuzzling her neck. "How did your talk go with Aunt Sara?"

"You mean the "let-me-see-if-she-is-good-enough-for-my- Rusty-talk?"

"That's the one."

"Better than I anticipated. I think I passed the

test."

"With flying colors," he whispered, his tongue dancing in and out of her ear.

Sydney pushed at his chest. "I did find out something though. Contrary to what my husband led me to believe, he left many a broken hearts when he left Black Bottom."

"I never said I lived the life of a monk. Only that I'd never been serious about anyone until you." They

kissed.

Sydney felt his hand move inside the opening of her robe and caught it. "It's only going to

make it worse when we have to stop."

"We don't have to. My aunt and uncle are sound sleepers. But now that I think about it, maybe you're right. You can kick up quite a bit of noise."

She grabbed a pillow and swung at him.

"You know I'm telling the truth," he said, catching her wrist and pulling her to him. "And you know what else I know, if I'm not able to be with my wife soon, very soon, I think I'm going to lose my mind."

"Poor baby."

Sydney was finally able to sleep. But before she did she thought about their conversation. He had to realize that she felt as he did. Being with him and not being able to be with him was torture. She smiled, remembering more of their conversation. She was no longer Sydney or Syd to him. Now, he constantly referred to her as his wife. Being an independent woman of the nineties, she should be offended. But she wasn't. She liked it. She liked it almost as much as she liked the word husband.

Awakening early as she usually did Sydney was surprised to see Ben and Sara up. "I see that I'm not the only one who rises early."

"We open the restaurant for breakfast at six-thirty. So we have to get an early start. If you want you can come along. It'll be a while before Rusty and Rana get up."

"I'd like that." She wrote Rusty a note telling him where she would be."

About three hours later Sydney was in the full swing of things. Taking customers orders, fixing coffee and doing a damn good job of a waitress.

"When Ben suggested that you come along this morning he didn't mean that you had to work." Sara joined Sydney at the counter.

"I'm enjoying myself."

"Try telling that to Rana."

"She doesn't like working here?"

"The word is hate."

Sydney wondered if Rana had mentioned her job offer to her parents. "Did Rana say anything to you about working for me when school lets out?"

"Did she say anything? That's all she's been talking about. The night you made the offer she called us and talked about it for hours."

"Are you and Ben all right about her coming to lake Gaston?"

We were a little worried. Especially after we read about that young model whose pictures wound up in that magazine."

Sydney wasn't surprised that the news had spread all the way to Louisiana. FLESH was one of the country's most read men's magazine. "I give you my word that nothing like that would happen to Rana."

"With Rusty and you both looking out for her Ben and I are pretty much satisfied. When we make the trip to North Carolina for the wedding we thought we'd come to Lake Gaston. Is she going to be living in an apartment with some other young models?"

"Rana will be staying with Rusty and me." Sydney saw the faint smile of relief. Then it changed. Sara was frowning. Sydney turned to see what was causing this reaction. A young woman who looked to be in her mid twenties was heading in their direction.

"Here comes trouble," Sara mumbled, shaking her head.

Before Sydney could ask what she meant the young woman was taking a seat at the counter beside Sara.

"How you doing Mrs. Snyder?"

"Just fine. And you Nicole?"

Sydney studied the young woman. She was an attractive brown eyed blonde but not beautiful like Rana. She did have amazingly long legs which she showed off in a pair of short shorts. She'd tried unsuccessfully to cover a row of

freckles on her nose and she had a slight overbite.

"I'll be doing great if the rumor I hear turns out to be true."

"What rumor is that?"

"That Rusty is back in town."

"He is."

"For how long?" And is he still gorgeous as ever?"

"A week maybe. And I think his fianceé can better answer your other question. Nicole, this is Rusty's fianceé, Sydney St. James. She owns a big cosmetic company."

Sydney didn't bother correcting Sara on either count. "Nice to meet you Nicole. Are you a friend of Rusty's?"

"You could say that."

She was an ex-girlfriend.

"When I came in I thought you were related to Mrs. Snyder. Her sister maybe."

A not to subtle reference to Sydney's advanced age. But then again to anyone in their twenties anyone not in their twenties were relics. "When you think about it when Rusty and I get married Sara and I will be related. So your first impression was right. Sort of."

Sara chuckled.

Rusty wasn't at the house when Sydney returned. She called out for Rana but she wasn't there either. After a quick shower she took a short nap. Short because the moment she closed her eyes someone was waking her up. Rusty. He was on the bed leaning over her. "This is what I call a Kodak moment. My wife, the workaholic, taking a nap in the middle of the afternoon."

Sydney reluctantly opened her eyes. "I have you know that your wife has put in a full five hours of work."

"Doing what?"

"Waitressing."

"Poor baby. Do your feet ache?" He began to massage her feet, slowly making his way up her leg to her thigh.

"Remember my aching feet?" Her voice was strained.

"Are you sure nothing else is aching?" He leaned down to kiss her.

Her hands were on his back. "Have you been exercising? You're perspiring."

"I'm not stinking am I? Smell me." He pressed against her. "If you choke, I'll shower."

Sydney coughed repeatedly, exaggerating.

"I thought women enjoyed the masculine odor of men?"

"Not this woman. After you shower you can tell me what you've been doing."

"I've been thinking about you. That's why I'm all hot and sweaty." He pretended to lunge at

her.

After waiting for what seemed like an hour for Rusty Sydney went to see what was keeping him. She opened the bathroom door and saw him. His magnificent body was silhouetted against the shower door. Her husband. He was singing his favorite song: We're caught in a trap I can't walk out

Because I love you too much baby

Her husband was an odd young man. Not very many men his age favorite song was Elvis Presley's "Suspicious

Minds."

Sydney had changed from her robe into a pair of lightweight blue trousers and a matching silk tank top when Rusty rejoined her. He was still shirtless but he'd changed into a pair of exercise shorts.

"I showered and put on cologne." He pulled her up from the bed wrapping his arms tightly around her. He smelled of HERO. "I have a surprise for you." He led her outside to the back of the house. "What do you think?"

Sydney looked around trying to see what it was she was missing. "About what?"

"The hammock."

"What about it?"

"I fixed it today. For you. Do you like it?"

"I like it."

"I call it chez Syd."

"Aren't you going to join me," Sydney asked.

"If you insist."

For a long time they lay silently, peacefully, contently.

"How many kids do you want?"

Sydney raised her head to look at him. "To be honest I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, I have. Four should be enough. Three girls and a boy. Yeah, that should about do it."

"You're right. That should just about do it. Do me in. And why not two boys and two girls? Or three boys and a girl?"

"I like little girls."

"And big ones too. I met a friend of yours today."

He waited.

"Nicole."

"Nicole? Who is--you mean Nicky. Where did you see her?"

"At the restaurant. She was one of those broken hearts you left behind."

It wasn't a question so he didn't bother answering. "How did you meet?"

"Sara introduced us. She was anxious to verify if you were back in town. And whether you were still gorgeous."

"What did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her anything."

Quickly, adeptly he moved bringing her on top of him. "You wouldn't be jealous would you Mrs. Snyder?"

"Of whom?"

"Of Nicky. Nicky with those gorgeous long legs."
"Obviously not long enough. She didn't catch you."

CHAPTER TEN

Sydney was outback at her hammock when she was surprised by an unexpected visitor. She jumped from the hammock almost falling out.

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking Rusty up on his offer."

Sydney pulled back from her brother's embrace. "And what is this?" She ran her fingers through the growing hair above his top lip.

It's commonly called a moustache."

"It's adorable."

"That's not the reaction I wanted." But at least she hadn't said it was cute. That's the reaction he'd gotten from their mother.

"Have you met the Snyders?"

"Briefly. They seem like nice people."

"They are. What about Rana?"

"She's all right I guess. Though I doubt she's as pleasant as her parents."

"I mean have you seen her? Does she know you're here?"

"Rusty is gone to get her. Mrs. Snyder said something about car trouble."

"She was having trouble with her truck yesterday."

A truck? All the girls he knew that looked like Rana Snyder drove sports cars.

Sydney and Grant were inside the house talking to Sara when Rusty and Rana finally arrived. Rusty was covered with oil and grease and fussing with Rana. "No wonder the transmission is ruined. What do you expect when you drive like a maniac." Rusty turned to Grant. "Glad you could make it."

"I had some free time. My boss is on vacation." He winked at Sydney.

Rana studied Grant. There was something different about him. He was... he had a moustache. It made him look ...different.

"Rana."

"Grant."

He turned to Rusty. "Can you suggest a hotel?"

"I won't hear of it," Sara broke in. "Rana and Sydney can share a room. And you can bunk in with Rusty. Now that that's settled, I'll set an extra place for supper. Rana can help you with your bags."

Sydney and Grant looked at each other knowingly and smiled. Sara Snyder was just like their mother. Decisive.

Outside, Grant reached inside the car and handed Rana his tote bag. At least he tried to. He turned around to see her staring at him. "What?"

"You rented an expensive car. Why? You wanted to show us hicks up?"

"I doubt if the residents of Black Bottom would appeciate being called hicks. Even if it's by a fellow resident. And about the car, I had nothing to do with the selection. It was waiting for me when I arrived at the airport. So if you want to accuse someone of snobbery, I suggest you look elsewhere. Perhaps a good place to start would be the mirror." He carried his own bags into the house.

Rana smiled. Grant St. James. She'd misjudged him.

The following day Grant volunteered to pick Rana up from school. When he drove up, Rana, along with some friends, mostly male, were waiting in front of the school. Grant waited a few seconds thinking she would get in. When she didn't he got out of the car.

"Rusty asked me to give you a ride home."

"I'll take you," some guy who obviously was the captain of something, said.

Before Grant could object and he was going to, Rana spoke up. "I'll go with Grant."

"Do you want to get something to eat or do you want to go straight home?"

Rana laughed. "You don't know this but I'm always hungry."

"How about your parents' place?" She hesitated a second too long before answering. "Where's the best burgers at?"

"In New Orleans."

Grant used the car phone to call Sydney. "It's me. Tell Mr. and Mrs. Snyder that Rana and I are going to New Orleans. We won't be late. Hamburgers. I'm trying. Bye sis."

"Rana lasted as long as she could then she finally said, "You're trying? What does that mean?" "Now that I'm finished graduate school I'll be working at lane Cosmetics. Since we'll be working together, Sydney thinks we should make an effort to get along. Call a truce maybe."

"New Orleans, is it part of the truce?"

"New Orleans has nothing to do with it."

Rana waited, assuming he had more to say. He didn't.

Rana was right. The hamburgers at Ma Possum were the best he'd eaten. Though the name of the restaurant took a little getting used to.

As they drove back to Black Bottom Rana realized that she was doing all the talking. She was the one revealing things about herself. Grant on the other hand, said little. And when he did say something, it wasn't personal. For all she knew about him she could have read it off his driver's license. Although, she did learn one thing about him. He liked cheddar cheese on his fries.

At eleven thirty-five they pulled into the Snyders' driveway. Grant turned off the engine and opened the door to get out but Rana caught his arm.

"What?"

"Don't you want to kiss me Grant?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"So you don't want to kiss me?"

"Like I said, don't be ridiculous."

"What's stopping you?"

"You're seventeen."

"And?"

"And I'm twenty-two."

"My mistake. I forgot. You can now sign up for social security at twenty-two." They laughed. "I'm not positive but I don't think it's a crime for a twenty-two year old to kiss a seventeen year old. Just a kiss Grant." She was smiling at him. "If it makes you feel safer, I'll put my hands on the dashboard. And leave them there. I promise."

Safe would've meant him staying in North Carolina and staying away from Ran Snyder. Grant knew he shouldn't but even as he thought it, he was leaning towards Rana, brushing his lips gently against hers.

Although Rusty still had his own apartment, him not living with Sydney was becoming more and more a technicality. They'd been back in Lake Gaston for a little over a week and in that time most of Rusty's belongings were at Sydney's. He didn't see why he didn't just move in. After all, they were married. But Sydney had to constantly remind him that except for Jennifer, Olivia and his friend at the restaurant, no one knew they were already married.

Sydney checked her watch. She wondered if something was wrong. Everyday Rusty phoned her at exactly ten o'clock. It was now twenty minutes after ten. She was dailing the last two digits of the restaurant when he walked into her office.

"I thought I'd surprise you today. I don't want our marriage to become boring and predictable." He pulled her up from her chair and kissed her. Kissed her as if he'd not just made love to her earlier that morning.

Sydney remembered last night. There was nothing boring about their marriage. And as for predictability, Rusty was the most spontaneous and creative man she'd ever known. "There's little chance of that happening."

Rusty sat in her chair, pulling her down on his lap. "Two more weeks."

"What happens in two more weeks?"

He was pulling at her earlobe with his teeth then he stopped. "You're joking right?"

"What? Have I forgotten something important?"

He stood up, almost causing her to land on the floor. "Have you forgotten something important?" he said accusingly. "Now that I think about it I can see how it would easily slip your mind. It's not important. Only us getting married in front of our family and friends."

"I'm sorry." Sydney wrapped her arms around him and attempted to kiss him but he pulled away.

He looked at her calendar. "You have everything written down here but your wedding date. You even have a doctor's appointment penciled in." He momentarily forgot his anger. "Is something wrong?"

"Routine checkup. And about us getting married, I didn't really forget it. I just don't think of it in terms of weeks. I just know that August 14th is going to be the second happiest day of my life. The happiest being the moment you walked into my life." This time when she tried to kiss him he didn't pull away.

"Sydney--" Ryan stopped. "Excuse me. Debbie wasn't at her desk.

Sydney tried to pull away from Rusty's embrace but he wouldn't let her go. Actually he held her tighter. Men could be quite juvenile at times. "I'm glad you're here. I've been meaning to call you." Sydney wished there was an easier way to tell him about Rusty and her. "Rusty and I are married."

"That explains the sudden vacation."

"Actually we got married before the vacation," Rusty added. According to Sydney the mature thing would've been not to gloat. But he wasn't the type of husband to always pay attention to what his wife said.

"I hope this makes you happy."

Sydney was dressed and waiting for the doctor to return with the results of her test. She wasn't concerned. Except for being a little tired which she attributed to work and the upcoming wedding, she felt fine.

"You're in excellent health Sydney. Which is a good thing under the circumstances."

"Under the circumstances?" She hoped she wasn't anemic. It did run in her family.

"You're pregnant."

"I'm pregnant?"

"You're pregnant. You know having a baby."

Sydney knew all right. or at least she could imagine. Weight gain. Water retention. Four o'clock feedings. Cravings. "How could this happen?"

"The usual way I suspect."

"I mean we've been taking precautions." Then she remembered that morning when...

Her doctor was still smiling at her. "I take it that you remember how it happened."

Sydney didn't bother going back to her office after her doctor's appointment. She went home. She was pregnant. Rusty and her were having a baby. She wasn't worried about Rusty's reaction. She knew he would be overjoyed. What she was trying to figure out was how she felt about it. How did she feel about becoming a mother.

Sydney met Rusty at the door. "Close your eyes. I have a surprise for you." She led him to the dining room. "Open your eyes."

The table was beautifully set. "You cooked me dinner."

"Your favorite." She hoped. "Lift off the top."

A red balloon with the words CONGRATULATIONS DAD

written on it flew out. "I don't get--are we pregnant?"

She nodded.

Rusty let out a earsplitting yell then he picked her up and twirled her around.

"You seem a little happy."

"I'm having a baby with the woman I love. So yeah, I'm a litle happy." Realizing that he still had her in the air, he let her down. "I didn't shake anything loose did I?"

"Everything is still in place."

"What about you Syd, are you as happy as I am?"

"I don't think anyone could be as happy as you are. But yes, I am happy."

"I should've been with you when you found out."

"That would've been nice. You could've picked me up off the floor."

Rusty had a thousand questions. He wanted to know when was her next appointment. He was going to be there. He wanted to know when they could take the test to determine the sex of their baby. Though he was already sure that it was a girl. Father's instinct. And when would the doctor know how many babies there were. They could be having twins or triplets.

Sydney sat on the couch beside him. She just stared at him. Twins or triplets? Her poor husband had lost his mind. "It's a good thing that we're getting remarried soon. If we wait wait any longer you'd probably have to roll me down the aisle." She stood up, removing her blouse. She turned to the side. "Am I getting big?"

"You're only a month."

"But I feel like I'm getting bigger."

"Maybe your mind is preparing you for when you-"

"Go ahead and say it. Preparing me for when I get fat."

"I wasn't going to say fat. I was going to say when you start to showing."

She plopped back down on the couch.

"Be careful. You should ease yourself down. Just don't drop down like that."

"I think I'm going to be one of those women who gain a lot of weight."

"Pregnant woman are beautiful."

"Sure we are. While we're pregnant. But what happens after the baby comes and I still have on the weight?"

"When we go for our next appointment the doctor can put us on a diet and exercise program."

"We? I'm the one who is going to blow up like a balloon."

"You're worrying for nothing." He began to kiss her, on the neck, her bare shoulders. His hand was toying with the clasp of her bra.

She caught his hand. "That is what got us-me," she put his hand on her stomach, "this in the first place."

"And aren't we lucky." It wasn't a question.

That night lying in bed beside Rusty, Sydney remembered what Jennifer said when she told her the news about being pregnant. "If anyone can have it all, husband, children and a career, it's you Sydney."

Eight months later 7lbs. 12oz. Taylor James Snyder was born. Her proud father's first words to her were, "Darling, how'd you like a baby brother."

the end